The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis was to examine how sports can be used as a legitimation strategy and the effectiveness of this strategy. To examine this, a qualitative study of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a legitimation strategy and the effectiveness of this strategy was conducted. However, to examine the effectiveness of the strategy it was necessary to define a target audience. Hence, the effectiveness of the strategy was examined by studying the Western world's perception of it. The research was solely based on secondary data, which was analyzed using Thematic Network Analysis.

The results of the analyses showed how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia uses sports as a legitimation strategy to gain legitimacy by using sports as a means to signal conformity to the ideals, demands, and models of the Western World. However, the Western world predominantly perceives the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a legitimation strategy as an attempt to conceal The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's illegitimate practices and structures. Consequently, the Western world predominantly does not assign The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia legitimacy based on its use of sports as a legitimation strategy, revealing the strategy's ineffectiveness.

The thesis' results contribute to the existing literature on legitimacy by examining how sports can be utilized as a legitimation strategy and the effectiveness of this strategy. Additionally, the thesis recognizes that the perception of sports as a legitimation strategy, and the strategy's corresponding effectiveness, depends on the observer's socially constructed value system. Consequently, a limitation of this thesis is the sole examination of the Western world's perception of The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to determine the strategy's effectiveness, as it is possible that other audiences have different perceptions of the strategy, potentially affecting the strategy's general effectiveness.

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1. Introduction

Dating all the way back to ancient Greek and Roman societies, events such as the Olympic Games and gladiator battles served as both entertainment and opportunities for cultural exchange and competition (Bellis, 2019). Ever since, sports as a part of society has continued to develop, fostering major sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup, which can promote a sense of global community and understanding (Pereira, 2022). Furthermore, the hosting of these major international events has historically served to increase the attention towards the host nation, with the host nation typically devising its own narrative in this regard (Amnesty International Danmark, 2022). As a result, the practice of employing sports as a means of improving a nation's reputation has existed for a long time (Amnesty International Danmark, 2022). An early example is the 1936 Olympic Games hosted by Nazi Germany, where the primary objective was to portray The Third Reich as a constructive and attractive society (Elsborg, 2022). In recent years, there have been several instances of nations with a tarnished international reputation, seeking to host major sporting events, acquire international sports clubs, etc. This phenomenon has in recent years received increasing attention from the media, with some media accusing the nations of pursuing a hidden agenda to divert attention away from their human rights violations and abusive labor practices (Ganji, 2022). A recent example is Qatar's hosting of the FIFA World Cup, which received heavy criticism due to the corrupt award of hosting The World Cup and Qatar's abusive labor practices, among others (Ganji, 2022). Consequently, Western media used the term *sportswashing* to describe Qatar's hosting of the World Cup as they claimed that Qatar was using sports as a means to improve its reputation and divert attention away from its human rights violations (Ganji, 2022; Amnesty International Danmark, 2022).

The term 'sportswashing' was initially used by the organization, *Sports for Rights*, to describe Azerbaijan's hosting of the 2015 European Games: "*Azerbaijan is engaged in sportswashing: attempting to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events*" (Elsborg, 2022). Since, 'sportswashing' as a concept has been widely adopted by the media to describe the practice of using sports to divert attention away from criticism and wrongdoings (Elsborg, 2022; Amnesty International Danmark, 2022). Despite the contemporary and increasing use of the term 'sportswashing', there is currently no academic consensus on its definition. Furthermore, the academic research on the concept of 'sportswashing' is considered to be limited (Chadwick 2018a).

However, one of the more recent studies of sportswashing is provided by Davis, Plumley & Wilson (2023) who study The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's (henceforth KSA) quest for legitimacy on the global sporting stage using the empirical example of LIV Golf. In their study, Davis et al. (2023) acknowledge that sportswashing can also be perceived as a legitimation strategy and studies how KSA uses LIV Golf in its push for legitimacy. However, Davis et al. (2023) are merely scratching the surface of KSA's wider use of sports as a legitimation

strategy. In addition to its Public Investment Fund's (Henceforth PIF) establishment of LIV Golf, KSA has increased its engagement and investments in the global sporting sector tremendously with some of the most prominent examples being its takeover of the football club Newcastle United FC and its seasonal hosting of Formula 1 (Elsborg, 2022). Consequently, it is interesting to build upon Davis et al.'s (2023) study and examine KSA's wider use of sports as a legitimation strategy and its effectiveness to contribute to the limited academic research on 'sportswashing'. These considerations lead to the following research question:

How does KSA use sports as a legitimation strategy and how effective is KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy?

2. Thesis structure

In this section, the structure of the thesis is outlined to provide an overview of the thesis' overarching sections, their purposes, and how the sections are linked to one another.

Part 1

The first section of the thesis is the *introduction*. The purpose of the introduction is to establish the background for the research question. The introduction leads to the second section which is the *research question*. The purpose of the *research question* is to encapsulate the aim of the thesis by specifying what the authors aim to examine. Together, the *introduction* and the *research question* establish the first part of the thesis. The collective purpose of the first part of the thesis is to establish the setting for *what* the authors aim to examine and *why* they aim to examine it.

Part 2

The research question is followed by the *theoretical framework* of the thesis. The purpose of the *theoretical framework* is to specify the theories that are used to provide an answer to the research question. Following the description of the theoretical framework of the thesis, the *methodology* of the thesis is presented, with the purpose of introducing the methodological approach that the authors use to answer the *research question* of the thesis. The *methodology* is followed by the sections; *delimitations* and *definition of terms*. The purpose of the section *delimitations* is to provide a clear consensus on what the authors aim to examine in the thesis and as a consequence, the authors establish the scope of the thesis by delimiting the boundaries of their research. The purpose of the section *definition of terms* is to define the most prominent terms that are used throughout the thesis to provide a clear consensus on what the authors refer to when they use the terms. Together, the sections; *theoretical framework*, *methodology*, *delimitations*, and *definition of terms*, establish the second part of the thesis. The collective purpose of the second part of the thesis is to establish a consensus on *what* the authors aim to examine and *how* the authors aim to examine it.

Part 3

The third part of the thesis consists of the analytical sections. This part is divided into three sections, of which the first is *KSA's need for legitimacy*. The section acts as a situational analysis where the purpose is to examine and outline why KSA needs legitimacy. Thus, this section provides the foundation for the following section; *KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy*, which is the second analytical section of the thesis. The purpose of the section, *KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy*, is to examine how KSA uses sports as a legitimation strategy. Thus, the purpose of this section is to enable the authors to answer the first part of the thesis' research question. This section is followed by the section, *the effectiveness of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy*, which is the third analytical section of the thesis. The purpose of this section is to build

upon the prior section, *KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy*, by analyzing the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Thus, the purpose of this section is to enable the authors to answer the second part of the thesis' research question. Together, the sections; *KSA's need for legitimacy*, *KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy*, and *the effectiveness of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy* establish the third part of the thesis. The collective purpose of the third part of the thesis is to provide the analytical results necessary to answer the research question of the thesis.

Part 4

The fourth part of the thesis is the *discussion*. The purpose of this section is to discuss the results of the analytical sections and the considerations, implications, and reflections that arose following the development of the thesis.

Part 5

The fifth and final part of the thesis is the *conclusion*. The purpose of this section is to outline the contributions of the thesis and provide a precise and comprehensive answer to the second section of the thesis, the *research question,* based on the results from the analytical sections in part 3 of the thesis.

The structure of the thesis is visualized below:

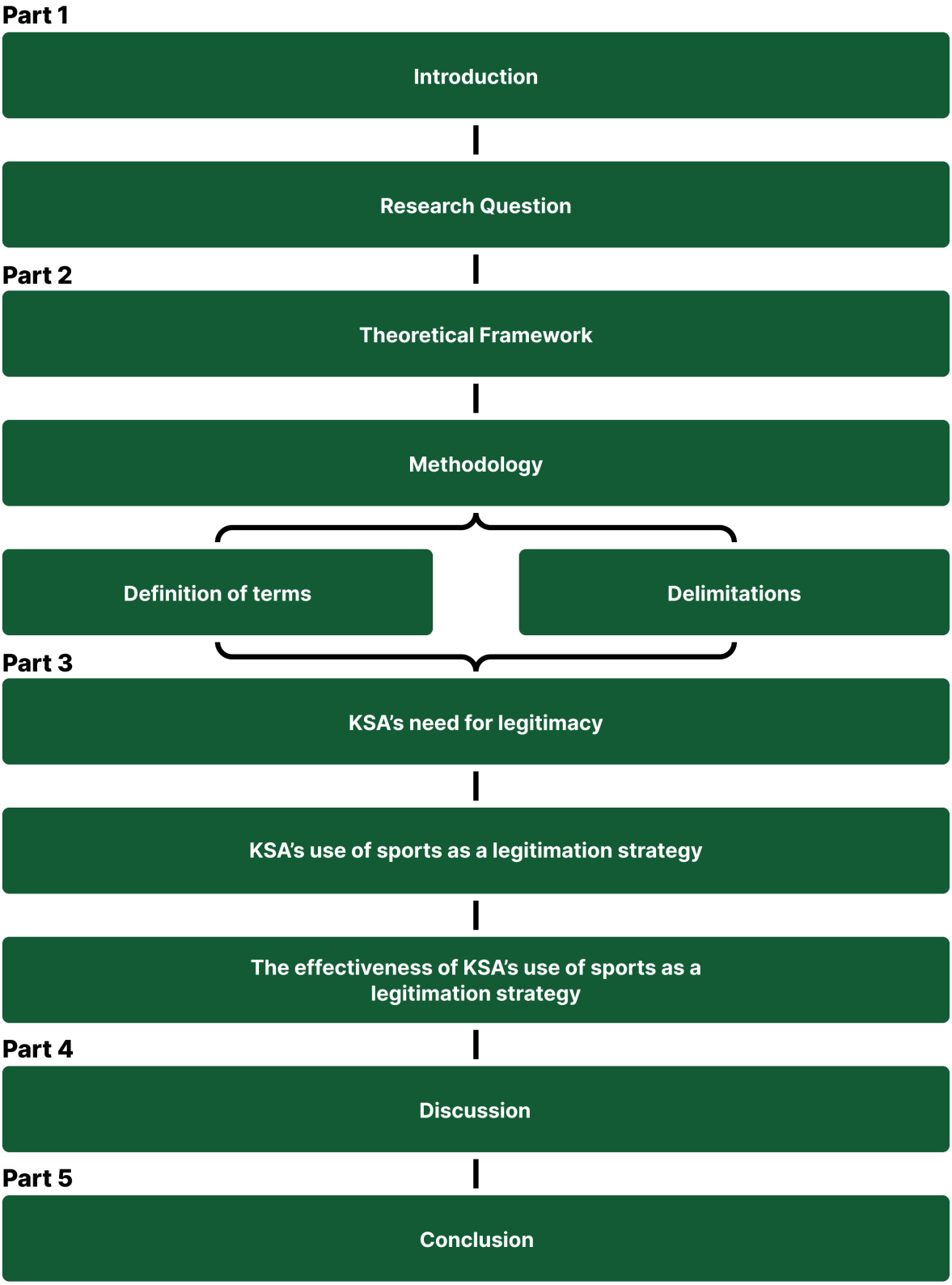

Figure 2.1: Thesis structure

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Place marketing

Throughout time the term *marketing* has been defined and redefined multiple times (AMA, 2017). However, one of the most acknowledged definitions is provided by the American Marketing Association (2017) which defines marketing, as: *"The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large*" (AMA, 2017). Furthermore, Kotler, Haider & Rein (1993) specifically emphasize the importance of *strategic place marketing*, which is a strategic approach to promote and enhance the attractiveness of a place (such as a city, region, or country) in order to attract and retain residents, visitors, businesses, and investors.

Strategic place marketing involves identifying the unique features and advantages of a place, developing a clear positioning and branding strategy, and implementing a range of marketing and communication tactics to promote the place and its offerings to target audiences. This approach recognizes that places, like products, can be marketed strategically in order to build and maintain a strong reputation, increase demand, and achieve sustainable economic and social development (Kotler et al., 1993). According to Kotler et al. (1993), all places occasionally experience both cyclical and even prolonged periods of poor health, making them what Kotler et al. (1993) define as *sick*.

The health of places falls along a continuum. At the negative extreme, there are places that lack the resources to launch a recovery, indicating they are *chronically depressed* (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 4). The other extreme consists of places having *boom and bust characteristics* (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 4). In relation to this continuum Kotler et al. (1993) argue that; *"Whatever economic circumstances a place finds itself in, it inevitably evolves into new circumstances. Every place is subject to internal growth and decline cycles as well as to external shocks and forces beyond its control"* (p. 4).

The major forces upsetting the economic equilibrium of communities are rapid technological change, global competition, and political power shifts (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 8). In relation to global competition, every place is considered a challenger to one another in terms of attracting target audiences and thus establishing the conditions for economic prosperity. Kotler et al. (1993) describe it; "*No longer are places merely the settings for business activity. Instead, every community has to transform itself into a seller of goods and services, a proactive marketer of its products and its place value. Places are, indeed, products whose identities and values must be designed and marketed. Places that fail to market themselves successfully face the risk of economic stagnation and decline*" (p. 10). The primary challenge of places is, therefore, to strengthen their adaptability

to the changing marketplace, seize opportunities, and sustain their vitality (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18). One way to overcome this challenge is through the use of place marketing.

However, prior to engaging in place marketing, Kotler et al. (1993) argue that it is relevant to go through a planning phase, consisting of the following three steps; *"First, it must define and diagnose the community's condition, its major problems, and their causes. Second, it must develop a vision of the long-term solution to the community's problems based on a realistic assessment of the community's values, resources, and opportunities. Third, it must develop a long-term plan of action involving several intermediate stages of investment and transformation."* (p.18). Upon the completion of the planning phase it is relevant to continue with the place marketing strategy, where one of the key activities is; *"Promoting the place's value and image so that potential users are fully aware of the place's distinctive advantage*" (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18).

Kotler et al. (1993) define a place's image as "*the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a people have of a place*". Further, Kotler et al. (1993) argue that it is important for a place to design an effective image to attract and retain residents, visitors, businesses, and investors (pp. 142-143). However, due to the competitive environment and the ever-changing world, image management is an ongoing process that entails researching image changes and understanding their dynamics to maintain or enhance a place's image.

In this thesis, Kotler et al.'s (1993) theory on strategic place marketing is utilized to describe why KSA needs legitimacy. The theoretical link between place image and legitimacy is further explained in section 7.

3.2 Legitimacy

The term *legitimacy* has throughout time been defined and redefined multiple times by different social scientists. Maurer (1971) was one of the first to define *legitimacy* by claiming that *"legitimation is the process whereby an organization justifies to a peer or superordinate system its right to exist."* (Maurer, 1971, p. 361). Since Maurer's (1971) initial definition of *legitimacy*, *legitimacy* as a concept has been studied heavily by academic scholars including Suchman (1995).

Suchman (1995) defines *legitimacy* as *"a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions"* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). According to Suchman (1995), this definition should be perceived as an inclusive, broad-based definition of the term, that accounts for both the evaluative and the cognitive dimensions, while also recognizing the social audience's importance in relation to the legitimation dynamics. Furthermore, Suchman (1995) states *"Legitimacy is a perception or assumption in that it represents a reaction of observers to the organization as they see it; thus, legitimacy is possessed objectively, yet created*

subjectively." (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). This notion is interesting because it highlights how *organizational legitimacy* is subjectively established by individuals who find the organization's business practices, or existence, to align with the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). However, *legitimacy* is objectively possessed by an organization through collective recognition from observers that the organization conforms to the observers' socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. This collective recognition is what objectively makes the organization legitimate (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, it is also crucial to emphasize that *legitimacy* is achieved by being perceived as being consistent with the observers' socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Thus, organizations can deviate from the observers' socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions and still be perceived as legitimate if the deviations are unnoticed (Suchman, 1995).

3.2.1 Pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy

In continuation, Suchman (1995) defines the three types of organizational *legitimacy*: *pragmatic, moral, and cognitive* (p. 577). The three types of organizational *legitimacy* are all based on the general perception that organizations can be awarded *legitimacy* if their organizational activities are considered to be *"desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 577). However, the three types of *legitimacy* differ from one another in terms of the different kinds of behavioral dynamics that they are based on (Suchman, 1995).

Generally, *pragmatic legitimacy* is considered to be based on the behavioral dynamics of exchange, as it refers to audiences supporting organizational policies or actions based on the expectation that these actions or policies directly or indirectly affect the audiences positively (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). The simplest type of *pragmatic legitimacy* is considered to be *exchange legitimacy,* as it is grounded in an observer supporting an organizational policy based on that policy's expected value for that particular observer (Suchman, 1995, p. 578).

In contrast to *pragmatic legitimacy*, *moral legitimacy* is based on an observer's positive normative evaluation of an organization and its activities, in terms of whether the activities from a moral standpoint can be considered desired within the observer's socially constructed value system (Suchman, 1995). Thus, one of the key differentiators between *pragmatic* and *moral legitimacy* is the consideration of whom organizational activities benefit, with *pragmatic legitimacy* being based on the activities benefitting the observer(s), whereas *moral legitimacy* instead is based on a prosocial logic (Suchman, 1995). One type of *moral legitimacy* is *procedural legitimacy* which is assigned to entities by observers that perceive the entity to embrace socially accepted techniques and procedures (Suchman, 1995, p. 580). Another type is *structural legitimacy*, which is assigned to entities that are perceived to have structural characteristics that, in the eyes of the evaluating

observers, are located within a morally favored taxonomic category (Suchman, 1995, p. 581). Lastly, *personal legitimacy* refers to a type of *moral legitimacy* that is assigned to the entity based on the charisma and personal qualities of individual organizational leaders (Suchman, 1995, p. 581).

Cognitive legitimacy differs significantly from *moral* and *pragmatic legitimacy* as it is based on cognition rather than evaluation or interest (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, *cognitive legitimacy* is based on the observer's perception of an organization as being necessary or inevitable based on the observer's taken-for-granted cultural account (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) defines two types of *cognitive legitimacy*: *comprehensibility* and *taken-for-grantedness*. *Comprehensibility* is assigned to an entity based on the observer's perception that the entity's mere existence is necessary for the observer to comprehend the chaotic cognitive environment in the social world (Suchman, 1995, p. 582). *Taken-for-grantedness* is based on the mere existence of the organization as being taken for granted, as the observer is unable to imagine a world without the existence of the organization (Suchman, 1995, p. 583). Thus, *taken-for-grantedness* is the most powerful source of legitimacy, as the organization becomes unassailable due to the observer's inability to imagine alternatives. However, *taken-for-grantedness* is difficult to attain for extended periods as it is unlikely that only one entity can perform a specific activity (Suchman, 1995, p. 583).

3.2.2 Legitimation strategies

In continuation of his definition of different types of *legitimacy,* Suchman (1995) builds upon Oliver's (1991) strategic responses to institutional processes by presenting different legitimation strategies that organizations can employ. However, whereas Oliver (1991) presents different strategies and tactics that organizations may employ in response to pressures toward conformity with the institutional environment, Suchman (1995) presents different legitimation strategies that organizations can employ to gain, maintain, and/or repair *pragmatic-, moral-,* and/or *cognitive- legitimacy*. In this sense, Suchman (1995) adds another dimension to Oliver's (1991) strategic responses to institutional processes by taking into account both whether the purpose is to gain, maintain, or repair *legitimacy* and what kind of *legitimacy* the aim is to gain, maintain, or repair.

One of the strategies that Suchman (1995) argues organizations can use to try to gain *legitimacy* is to *"conform to the dictates of preexisting audiences within the organization's current environment* (Suchman, 1995, p. 587). By conforming to environments managers try to gain legitimacy by simply conforming to the preexisting institutional regime of the environment in which the organization is located, or in other words following the environment's cultural orders and institutional logic (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through this legitimation strategy an organization is encouraged to conform to observers' demands (Suchman, 1995). One of the ways to do so is by responding to the observers' needs and/or through the

dispositional approach of trading on its strong reputation in related activities, which can be reinforced by the use of character references that are willing to vouch for the organization's innate reliability (Suchman, 1995).

However, to gain *moral legitimacy* through the legitimation strategy of conforming to the environment, the organization is encouraged to conform to the environment's principled ideals, rather than conforming to the environment's instrumental demands that the gain of *pragmatic legitimacy* relies upon (Suchman, 1995). One of the strategies to gain *moral legitimacy* is to symbolize that the organization is producing concrete meritorious outcomes, and thus symbolize that the organization is conforming to the environment's principled ideals (Suchman, 1995).

In contrast to the legitimation strategies to gain *pragmatic* and *moral legitimacy* through conformity to the environment, the legitimation strategies to gain *cognitive legitimacy* through conformity to the environment primarily focus on conforming to established models and/or standards (Suchman, 1995). One of the corresponding strategies to do so is *mimetic isomorphism*, which implies that organizations mimic the most prominent and secure entities in their fields in the pursuit of *cognitive legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995).

The concept of *isomorphism* and *mimetic isomorphism* originates from DiMaggio & Powell's (1983) study of how organizations within an organizational field, through isomorphic processes, become more similar as actors paradoxically try to change them. Furthermore, DiMaggio & Powell (1983) emphasizes that mimetic processes tend to appear when the organization is plagued by a high degree of uncertainty caused by for example ambiguous goals or a symbolic uncertainty created by the organizational environment. In this sense, organizational uncertainty encourages organizations to mimic other organizations to overcome problems with ambiguous causes or unclear solutions, as the mimetic approach may yield a viable solution with little expense (Cyert & March, 1963). Linking this perception of *mimetic isomorphism* back to Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies, DiMaggio & Powell (1983) notes that *legitimacy* also plays a pivotal part in the mimetic processes as organizations tend to mimic other organizations that they perceive to be more legitimate and/or successful. In this sense, the mimetic processes do not necessarily lead to an increase in efficiency but can instead be perceived as an attempt to attain *legitimacy*, by mimicking organizations that are perceived to be more legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

3.2.3 Why do organizations need legitimacy?

Following Suchman's (1995) definition of *legitimacy,* and the legitimation strategies that can be employed in an attempt to gain it, it is fundamental to lastly address the important question of why organizations strive to be perceived as legitimate.

According to Parsons (1960), *legitimacy* tends to lead to persistence as audiences tend to supply resources to organizations that appear desirable, proper, or appropriate. In other words, the perception of being a legitimate organization can lead to the support of people, who will thus engage in resource transactions with the organization. In contrast, organizations that lack *legitimacy* tend to be exposed to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary (Meyer & Rowan, 1991), consequently making it harder for them to engage in transactional relations with audiences that possess these attitudes toward the organization.

In this thesis, Suchman's (1995) theory on legitimation strategies will be utilized to examine to answer the first part of the research question in terms of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* in an attempt to gain, repair, and/or maintain *legitimacy*. Furthermore, Suchman's (1995) theory on *legitimacy* will be utilized to examine the second part of the research question, by examining whether KSA is assigned *legitimacy* based on its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, to determine the effectiveness of the strategy. Additionally, Kotler et al.'s (1993) theory on place marketing will be linked to Parsons' (1960) and Meyer & Rowan's (1991) explanations of the need for *legitimacy* to describe why KSA needs *legitimacy* in section 7.3.

3.3 Cultural differences

Culture refers to the set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and practices shared by a group of people who have a common heritage or identity which are transmitted from one generation to the next (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). A well-renowned study of culture and cultural differences among geographical areas, is Samuel P. Huntington's (1993) "*The Clash of Civilizations?*", which was later published as the book "*The Clash Of Civilizations - And The Remaking Of World Order*" (Huntington 1996). Huntington (1993) argued that the major sources of conflict in the post-Cold War era were cultural and civilizational differences. Huntington (1993) suggests that the world is divided into different civilizations based on religion, culture, and history and that these civilizations will increasingly come into conflict with one another. According to Huntington (1993), the clash of civilizations is not only about differences in ideology or national interests but also about differences in values and ways of life that are rooted in cultural and religious traditions. Huntington (1993) argues that cultural differences are becoming more pronounced and that they are becoming the defining factor in international relations. When investigating cultural differences, Huntington's (1993) framework provides a useful starting point for understanding the ways in which cultural differences can lead to conflict. It highlights the importance of understanding the cultural context of conflict and the role of culture in shaping attitudes and behaviors (Huntington, 1993).

Huntington's (1996) book provides an understanding of the potential *clash* between the Islamic and Western civilizations. Huntington (1996) identified the "West" and the "Islamic" civilization as two of the most prominent civilizations that were likely to clash due to their cultural differences. Huntington (1996) argued

that the West, which includes Europe and North America, values individualism, democracy, and secularism, while the Islamic civilization, which spans from North Africa to the Middle East and parts of Asia, is characterized by a strong sense of collective identity, religious fundamentalism and resistance of the Western values (Huntington, 1996). Furthermore, Huntington (1996) argues that the cultural differences between the West and the Islamic civilization are significant enough to create a clash of civilizations. He points out that the West's efforts to promote democracy and human rights in the Middle East can be seen as an attack on Islamic culture and values, and that the Islamic world's rejection of Western values can lead to conflict with the West (Huntington, 1996).

In this thesis, the definition of culture and the cultural differences between the Islamic civilization and the Western civilization are considered relevant to highlight, as culture is a key constituent in people's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Thus, culture and cultural differences should be taken into consideration when examining the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as *legitimacy* is a socially constructed concept that is created and assigned based on the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 1995). Culture and cultural differences are not explicitly applied in the analyses but establish an important preconception of how culture affects the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions, and thus affect the observer's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* which determines the effectiveness of the strategy.

3.4 Sportswashing and soft power

A more recent and newly examined branch within the concept of *legitimacy* is the notion of sports being used as a strategy to legitimize organizations and/or nation-states. Within the recent branch of legitimacy, Davis et al. (2023) have examined how governments are using sports to legitimize themselves. In this study, Davis et al. (2023) emphasize, through the empirical research of The Public Investment Fund's (KSA) establishment and development of the LIV Golf tour, how nation-states are using sports to legitimize themselves and gain *soft power*. Nye (1990) defines *soft power* as the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion. However, Nye's (1990) definition of soft power has been subject to notable criticism. Among these critiques, the definition is deemed too structural or Western-centric (Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 256). Moreover, there is a lack of clear definition regarding what *soft power* actually entails, how it can be obtained, the various forms of attraction that can lead to its acquisition, and the potential risks for states that endeavor to acquire soft power (Grix & Brannagan, 2016, p. 256). Given these limitations, other scholars have utilized the concept of sportswashing to advance Nye's concept of soft power (Davis et al., 2023).

The term sportswashing was initially recognized in academia by Chadwick (2018a; 2018b; 2022) and has been branded as a new word for an old idea, due to the contemporary term describing a phenomenon that has existed

for more than a century (Ormesher, 2022; Menon, 2019). However, despite the term becoming increasingly popular, there is a lack of academic consensus on the definition of sportswashing (Chadwick, 2018a). One of the initial definitions stems from organizations such as Amnesty International, which defines sportswashing as *"an attempt by a government to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events"* (Davis et al., 2023, p. 5). However, Davis et al. (2023) note that sportswashing should not only be perceived as a strategy for diversion or distraction but also as a legitimation strategy. Following this notion, Davis et al. (2023) examine *"the wider strategy of the PIF in relation to LIV Golf with consideration of Saudi Arabia's quest for legitimacy on the global sporting stage"* (Davis et al., 2023, p. 1). However, as Davis et al. (2023) also to some extent note, they are merely scratching the surface of both LIV Golf as a strategy to gain *legitimacy* through sportswashing and KSA's more wide-reaching push for *legitimacy* on the sporting stage.

3.5 Research Gaps

Following the development of the theoretical framework, multiple research gaps were identified, which this thesis aims to examine and answer alongside its research question. The first research gap identified is the lack of an academic consensus on the definition of sportswashing, despite the term being used liberally and simplistically by Western countries (Chadwick, 2018a). Thus, one of the aims of this thesis is to provide a definition of the term sportswashing that can contribute to the establishment of an academic consensus on the definition of sportswashing. Additionally, as noted by Davis et al. (2023), the study of sports as a legitimization strategy, and specifically, KSA's use of sports in this regard, is considered to be in its early stages within academia. Therefore, one of the objectives of this thesis is to expand the existing literature on sports as a legitimization strategy by examining how KSA uses sports as a legitimation strategy, and thus build upon Davis et al.'s (2023) study. Furthermore, it is noted that Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies are designed for an organizational level, in terms of how organizations can gain/maintain/repair *legitimacy*. Hence, a research gap is identified in terms of how these legitimation strategies can be transcended to an (inter)national level. Consequently, another aim of this thesis is to build upon Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies by examining how these can also be employed by nations, through the study of how KSA use of sports as a legitimation strategy to gain/maintain/repair legitimacy.

4. Research method

Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill's (2016) research onion is used to describe the research method of this thesis. The research onion is a methodological framework that outlines the layers of research approaches and techniques used in social science research. It is designed to guide researchers in selecting appropriate research methods and tools for the examination of their research questions and the accomplishment of their objectives (Saunders et al., 2016). According to Saunders et al. (2016), it is necessary to explain the research philosophy and approaches to theory development before formulating the research design. The factors, which have to be considered before proceeding to data collection and data analysis, are; *research philosophy, approach to theory development, methodological choice, research strategies,* and *time horizon* (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 124). The authors' decisions in relation to these factors are outlined in the following sections.

4.1 Research philosophy

The first layer of the research onion is *research philosophy* (Saunders et al., 2016). According to Saunders et al. (2016), "*The term research philosophy refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge*" (p. 124). Every stage in research consists of some types of assumptions. These include assumptions about human knowledge (*epistemological*), the realities to encounter in the research (*ontological*), and the extent and ways the researcher's own values influence the research process (*axiological* assumptions). All these assumptions shape how the researchers approach the research question, the methods they use to study it, and how they interpret the findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 124).

This thesis is based on an interpretive research philosophy. Interpretivism emphasizes that humans are different from physical phenomena because they create meanings (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 140). Interpretivists criticize positivists' purpose of discovering universal laws that apply to all people. Instead, interpretivism recognizes that individuals from different backgrounds, under various circumstances and at different times, create and experience different realities, which result in different meanings (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 140). Interpretivists argue that reducing the complexity of human experience to a set of law-like generalizations neglects the nuances and richness of human experiences (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 140). Therefore, interpretive research aims to generate novel and profound understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 140).

This thesis aims to examine: *"How does KSA use sports as a legitimation strategy and how effective is KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy?"*. By following the interpretive research philosophy, the authors acknowledge that individuals from different backgrounds, under various circumstances, and at different times, create and experience different realities (Saunders et al. 2016, p. 140). The interpretive research philosophy is considered especially relevant to use for this thesis, as the authors aim to examine the concept of *legitimacy*

which is described as "*a perception or assumption in that it represents a reaction of observers to the organization as they see it"* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Thus, the interpretive approach is considered relevant to use when studying the concept of *legitimacy* as the assignment of *legitimacy* is based on an audience's perception and interpretation of an entity and its actions. Hence, by following the interpretive research philosophy to study the phenomena of *legitimacy*, the authors acknowledge that audiences' perception and interpretation of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* might differ as audiences from different backgrounds, under various circumstances, and at different times, create and experience realities, and thus assign KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* different meanings.

As interpretivism is considered to be a wide concept that consists of multiple different interpretive research philosophies it is relevant to outline which specific interpretive research philosophy that is used for this thesis. This thesis primarily relies on the interpretive philosophy of hermeneutics. The field of study of hermeneutics is the human, human culture, and cognition (Egholm, 2014, p. 90). Thus, the field of study allows the authors to attempt to understand how individuals perceive phenomena from a contextual perspective and through interpretation of the actors' intentions and understandings, to achieve an understanding of the studied phenomenon. Hence, this field of study aligns well with this thesis' purpose of studying KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* and how effective KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is.

The ontological foundation of hermeneutics is based on realism (Egholm, 2014, p. 91). Therefore, the authors of this thesis do not intend to challenge the various meanings or opinions in specific situations, but rather to understand and describe them in detail (Egholm, 2014, p. 91). Thus, the purpose of this thesis is not to challenge KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* or the effectiveness of it, but rather to understand and describe the phenomenon in detail. Furthermore, the hermeneutic epistemological foundation of interpretation implies that authors do not set aside their own preconceptions, but rather actively use them to ideographically interpret individuals' experiences and meanings (Egholm, 2014, p. 91). Ideography is a term used in social sciences to describe the study of individuals, events, or phenomena in a unique and specific context, rather than the study of general laws or patterns that apply to a phenomenon (Egholm, 2014, p. 91). In the context of hermeneutics, ideography emphasizes the unique and specific meaning that texts or cultural artifacts have within their particular context (Egholm, 2014, p. 91). The specific context of this thesis is thus KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of the strategy. Furthermore, as hermeneutics allows the researchers to incorporate their preconception of the phenomenon when interpreting the phenomenon it establishes the natural risk of researcher bias. On the other hand, by being aware of these preconceptions, it allows researchers to actively use them in the interpretation of meanings and significance, rather than disregarding their importance to the conclusions of the study (Egholm, 2014, p. 94). In the context of this thesis, the authors' preconceived perceptions shaped the analytical approach used for the Thematic Network Analyses in terms of

how the different sources and excerpts were selected, and how the different codes and themes were developed. Hence, the authors' preconceptions have contributed to the study and interpretation of the thesis' phenomenon. Furthermore, the conduction of Thematic Network Analyses enabled the authors to identify connections between statements that describe the studied phenomena. This is consistent with hermeneutics' concept of coherence as a criterion of truth and thus accommodates the potential of the previously mentioned researcher bias (Egholm, 2014, pp. 91-92).

4.2 Approach to theory development

The second layer of the research onion is *approach to theory development* (Saunders et al., 2016). Given that research projects generally involve the use of theory, Saunders et al. (2016) emphasize the importance for researchers to describe their approach to theory development. The three main approaches to theory development are inductive, deductive, and abductive (Saunders et al., 2016). It is important for the researchers to be aware of which approach they choose to follow prior to establishing the research design to ensure coherence in the research design of the thesis. This thesis follows an abductive approach, where data is collected to explore a phenomenon, identify themes, and explain patterns, in order to generate new or modify existing theory, which is then subsequently tested through additional data collection (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 145). Hence, theory generation or modification is based on the incorporation of existing theories where appropriate (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 145). Thus, the abductive approach allows the researchers to develop new theories that are grounded in empirical evidence and that can explain the observed phenomenon in a more comprehensive and coherent way (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 148). Furthermore, rather than following a unidirectional movement from theory to data or data to theory, the abductive approach involves a back-and-forth process that effectively combines deduction and induction (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 148). An example of this back-and-forth process is found in section 8. Here, the sources and corresponding excerpts were first coded and grouped into themes based on the empirical findings (Appendix 1). Subsequently, the same sources and corresponding excerpts were coded and grouped into themes based on the combination of the preconception from the first analysis of the empirical data and the theoretical framework of Suchman (1995) exemplifying the abductive back-and-forth approach (Appendix 1).

4.3 Methodological choice

Following the outlining of the research philosophy and approach to theory development, it is possible to explain the research design of the thesis. The research design entails a comprehensive plan that outlines the specific course of action to address the research question (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 163-164). The third layer of the research onion and first part of the research design is *methodological choice* (Saunders et al., 2016).

When deciding the methodological choice, Saunders et al. (2016) advocate for three overall methods: *quantitative*, *qualitative*, or *mixed methods* (a combination of quantitative and qualitative). The authors use qualitative research to answer the research question of this thesis. The use of qualitative research is perceived to be in alignment with the interpretive research philosophy of the thesis, as *researchers need to make sense of the subjective and socially constructed meanings expressed about the phenomenon being studied* (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 168). Consequently, the authors have decided to use qualitative research to understand and describe KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, and to examine the effectiveness of the strategy.

4.4 Research strategies

The fourth layer of the research onion is *research strategies* (Saunders et al., 2016). Saunders et al. (2016) define a research strategy as "*a plan of how a researcher will go about answering her or his research question. It is the methodological link between your philosophy and subsequent choice of methods to collect and analyse data*" (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 177). Additionally, Saunders et al. (2016) advocate that the key to the choice of the research strategy is to ensure that the researchers can achieve a reasonable level of coherence throughout the research design, thus making it possible to answer the research question. There are many different research strategies, and besides all of them being fit for certain methodologies, they are neither strictly connected to a specific approach nor mutually exclusive, meaning it is possible to combine more strategies (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 177-179). In this thesis, the authors have decided to follow a combination of the research strategies of *archival research* and *grounded theory*, as the combination of these strategies contributes to a thorough and organized structure of the thesis.

The archival research strategy is the primary strategy of the thesis, as the data used for the thesis is solely secondary empirical data. Archival research is a form of data collection and analysis that involves the examination and analysis of historical documents, records, and data sources such as newspapers, letters, diaries, photographs, and government records (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 183-184). Further, archival research requires careful planning and preparation. Researchers need to identify relevant archives and sources, develop a strategy for searching and selecting materials, and establish criteria for evaluating the quality and reliability of the data (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 183-184). In relation to this thesis, the authors have gathered a significant amount of secondary empirical data to analyze KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of this strategy. The secondary empirical sources, which have been analyzed, consist of news articles, press releases, opinions, website landing pages, and tweets among others (Appendix 1 & 2). Analyzing the different sources allowed the researchers to discover patterns among different statements and actions to reach conclusions.

Saunders et al. (2016) also emphasize that the process of conducting archival research can be time-consuming as it often involves collecting and analyzing large amounts of data to find relevant information (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 183-184). The authors' efforts to overcome this challenge to ensure that the thesis is finalized within the set time-frame is outlined in section 5. Although the use of archival research can be a time-consuming research strategy, the authors considered it to be the best research strategy to examine the thesis' research question, as it seeks to answer *how* KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of this strategy. Thus, based on the description of archival research as a research strategy, archival research was considered the best research strategy to answer the research question aims to understand *how* rather than *why* KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and *how* effective KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is. Hence, by using archival research, in terms of analyzing multiple existing data sources, it has been possible to gain a broad understanding of all the different initiatives that KSA utilizes as a part of its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of the strategy.

However, when using archival research, it is important to be aware of the potential pitfalls that the strategy possesses. The main pitfall of archival research is that the quality and completeness of the data may be compromised by issues such as incomplete records, errors, and biases. Hence, researchers have to be aware of these limitations and take steps to address them through careful data analysis and source criticism (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 183-184). The authors' steps toward avoiding the previously mentioned pitfall will be elaborated on in section 4.7.

Additionally, the collected data through archival research have to be organized and structured in order to make general conclusions in accordance with the hermeneutical concept of coherence as a criterion of truth (Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, in addition to archival research, grounded theory has been used to organize and structure the subjective analytical process of the thesis through Thematic Network Analyses (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The primary aspect of grounded theory is the development of theory that is grounded in the data (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 193). Furthermore, grounded theory requires the researchers to follow an early commencement of data collection, a concurrent collection and analysis of data, and the development of codes and categories from the data as these are collected and analyzed (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 197). Thus, grounded theory is perceived as an abductive approach that seeks to gain insights to create new conceptual possibilities which are then examined (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 197). The previously mentioned aspects of grounded theory are exemplified by the thesis' Thematic Network Analyses and their processes, which is further elaborated in section 4.6.

4.5 Time horizon

The fifth layer of the research onion is *time horizon* (Saunders et al., 2016). According to Saunders et al. (2016) there are two types of time horizons in research studies, *longitudinal* and *cross-sectional*. Longitudinal studies concern the change or development of phenomena over a period of time. Cross-sectional on the other hand concerns the study of a particular phenomenon at a particular time (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 200). However, there are arguments for this thesis as being neither longitudinal nor cross-sectional. Firstly, the thesis is not considered a longitudinal study, as the aim of the thesis is neither to examine the development of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* nor the development of how effective KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is. Thus, the aim of the thesis does not concern the change or development of phenomena over a period of time, which is the purpose of longitudinal studies. Secondly, the thesis could be considered a cross-sectional study, as it examines a particular phenomenon (KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of this strategy) at a particular time (between 2016 and 2023). However, as the collected data for the thesis stems from a time period stretching over multiple years it questions whether the particular phenomenon is actually over a period of time as in longitudinal studies, rather than studied at a particular time as in cross-sectional studies. Thus, the thesis' study of the particular phenomenon is aligned with cross-sectional studies, however, the thesis data is aligned with longitudinal studies in terms of being from a period of time. Hence there are arguments for the thesis being neither longitudinal nor cross-sectional.

4.6 Data collection and data analysis

The core of the research onion is *data collection* and *data analysis*. This refers to the type of data the study uses, and how it is collected and processed (Saunders et al., 2016). According to Saunders et al. (2016), there are two types of data collection, *primary* and *secondary*. As mentioned in sections 4.3 and 4.4, the qualitative data used for this thesis consists only of secondary data. When using secondary data, Saunders et al. (2016) advocate for three overall types of data, being: *document*, *survey*, and *multiple source* (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 319). This thesis primarily relies on document secondary data, and primarily text documents such as; tweets, press releases, statements, news articles, opinion articles, etc. (Appendix 1 & 2). However, the thesis also relies on some non-text documents such as video interviews (Appendix 1 & 2). Both text and non-text documents have been thematized and interpreted from the same perspective and analyzed using Attride-Stirling's (2001) Thematic Network Analysis.

Thematic Network Analysis, as an analytical method, is supported by thematic networks, which act like web-like illustrations (networks). These networks encapsulate the overarching themes that constitute the given piece of text that is subject to the Thematic Network Analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In this sense, Thematic Network Analysis, through the use of thematic networks, is an excellent analytical approach to use when analyzing qualitative data, as the analytical approach provides the researchers with the tools to achieve a

sensitive, insightful, and rich exploration of the collected data's overt structures and underlying patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Hence, Thematic Network Analysis has been considered an excellent analytical method to analyze the data collected through archival research to explore the overt structures and underlying patterns of the collected data and thus understand how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of this strategy. To answer the first part of the research question, how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*, data primarily from KSA have been gathered and analyzed. To answer the second part of the research question, how effective is KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, data primarily from the US, the UK, and Denmark have been gathered. Thus, the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is analyzed by comparing KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to examine whether the strategy fulfills its intended purpose. The reason for the selection of these countries to answer the second part of the research question and the definition of the Western world will be elaborated in sections 5 and 6.4.

4.6.1 Data collection

As mentioned above, the thesis is solely based on secondary data. Thus, it is only pre-existing data that has been collected through archival research to answer the research question of the thesis.

One of the advantages of using secondary data is that this approach requires fewer resources, as the data is already established, meaning that the researchers do not have to allocate time to establish or gather new data (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 331). As it has not been necessary to spend time gathering primary data, the authors have been able to spend more time gathering, coding, interpreting, and analyzing numerous pre-existing documents. In total, the authors have gathered 149 sources for the thesis' Thematic Network Analyses originating primarily from KSA, the UK, the US, or Denmark with the aim of answering the research question of the thesis (Appendix 1 & 2). The sources originating from KSA have primarily been gathered to examine how KSA uses sports as legitimation strategy, whereas sources originating from the UK, the US, and Denmark have primarily been gathered to examine how the Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

The secondary data was collected between March 13, 2023, and April 6, 2023 (Appendix 1 & 2). The sources collected were solely published between 2016 and April 6, 2023, to ensure that only sources published after the presentation of Vision 2030 were used. The reason for the sole use of sources published after the launch of Vision 2030 is that the authors wish to examine KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as a part of Vision 2030 and the Western world's perception of this strategy. Hence, data prior to the presentation of Vision 2030 in 2016 have been considered irrelevant to answer the research question of this thesis.

4.6.2 Data analysis

Following the grounded theory strategy, the data have been gathered and analyzed simultaneously. The data analysis has been based on *Thematic Network Analysis* (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Thematic analysis aims to discover themes that are salient in a text at different levels, whereas thematic networks can be perceived as a way to facilitate the structuring and depiction of these themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). When conducting a Thematic Network Analysis the systematic extraction of themes is divided into three levels: *Basic Themes, Organizing Themes,* and *Global Themes* (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This process of extracting themes from textual data and illustrating these with some representational tool is a quite common approach in qualitative research, in this sense, Thematic Network Analysis cannot be considered to be a new method, but rather one that shares the key features of any hermeneutic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). What thematic networks offer in contrast to other qualitative analysis research tools is the web-like network as an organizing principle and a representational means, as well as making the procedures that may be employed in going from test to interpretation explicit (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The construction of the Thematic Network Analyses for this thesis collectively exemplify the key features of hermeneutic analysis that Thematic Network Analysis as a method possesses. Initially, the researchers had an exploratory approach, which led to Thematic Network Analysis A (Appendix 1). The purpose of this analysis has been to *explore* the external perception that KSA tries to establish of itself. Based on the thematic network of the Thematic Network Analysis A, the researchers recognized patterns of how KSA aims to be perceived (Appendix 1). These new insights then led to Thematic Network Analysis B, which has been based on the same data as Thematic Network Analysis A (Appendix 1). The only difference is that Thematic Network Analysis B solely uses the data from Thematic Network Analysis A which is linked to sports (Appendix 1). Hence, the data from Thematic Network Analysis A that does not concern sports have been excluded to solely *explain* how KSA use *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 1). Further, the data for Thematic Network Analysis B was reinterpreted using Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to interpret and analyze the data through the concept of *legitimacy* to answer the first part of the research question (Appendix 1). Following the findings from Thematic Network Analysis B, the researchers expanded the research to understand how the Western world, as an audience, perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, to answer the second part of the research question (Appendix 2).

All three Thematic Network Analyses were based on a three-stage process that consists of: *"(a) the reduction or breakdown of the text; (b) the exploration of the text; and (c) the integration of the exploration."* (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p. 390; Appendix 1 & 2). Each stage requires some sort of interpretation and differs from one another in terms of each stage requiring a more abstract level of analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

The first stage, *reduction or breakdown of the text*, requires the researchers to develop a coding framework that can help reduce the given data and dissect the text(s) into manageable and meaningful text segments (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Based on the codes, it is then possible to construct basic themes. Subsequently, the basic themes can be structured into organizing themes and thus the global theme to enable a description and exploration of the networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001). During the second stage, *exploration of the text*, the researchers return to the original text to examine it through the global theme(s), organizing themes, and basic themes outlined in the first stage of the analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Doing so, leads to the last step, *the integration of the exploration*, of which the summaries of the networks and relevant theory are brought together to examine the significant themes, concepts, patterns, and structures of the data. Thus, the aim of the final stage is to link the Thematic Network Analysis to the researcher's original research questions and related theoretical interests, in order to address these questions and interests with arguments based on the patterns that appeared in the exploration of the texts (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The approach of Thematic Network Analysis has initially been used in this thesis to *explore* the connection between sports and KSA's Vision 2030, which indicated KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 1). Subsequently, the approach has been used to answer the research question, by applying Suchman's (1995) theory regarding legitimation strategies and legitimacies, to *explore* and *explain* how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and how effective KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is. The specific use of the approach of Thematic Network Analysis is further described throughout the thesis' analyses in sections 8 and 9.

4.7 Establishing the quality of the research design

When establishing the quality of a research design, most researchers refer to *reliability* and *validity* as central criteria of judgment. Reliability refers to the replication and consistency of the research, whereas validity refers to the appropriateness of the measures used, the accuracy of the analysis of the results, and the generalizability of the findings (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 202). Reliability and validity are widely utilized techniques in quantitative studies but are generally deemed unsuitable from both a philosophical and technical standpoint in qualitative research (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 204-205). This is due to the interpretive nature of qualitative research, which views reality as a socially constructed and multifaceted concept (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 204-205). Therefore, it is considered pivotal to use other appropriate evaluation criteria to ensure that qualitative research is of high quality and trustworthiness (Saunders et al., 2016, pp. 204-205). Consequently, the quality of this thesis' research design is based on the alternative criteria; *'dependability'* instead of *'reliability'* and *'transferability'* instead of *'validity'* (Saunders et al., 2016, p. 205).

The compliance with the principles of dependability and transferability have been based on the same initiatives by the researchers. Dependability refers to the recording of all changes to produce a dependable account of the

emerging research focus, as it is likely to be modified during interpretive research (Saunders et al., 2016). Transferability is met by providing a full description of the whole research process so that the reader is able to judge the transferability of the study to another setting (Saunders et al., 2016). The authors of this thesis have aimed to meet the research quality criteria of dependability and transferability by being transparent throughout the research process. The memo/comment sections in the Thematic Network Analyses exemplify the authors' attempt to ensure a high degree of transparency in the thesis to fulfill the principles of dependability and transferability. (Appendix 1 & 2). By adding memos/comments to the different excerpts/codes and different themes for the Thematic Network Analyses, the authors provide a high degree of transparency and make it possible for the reader to understand the research process of the analyses as well as the changes of these processes. Furthermore, the authors have also made a section called “previous codes” which shows the codes that excerpts have previously had if they have been re-coded throughout the research process (Appendix 1 & 2). In addition to this, the authors have highlighted the discounted codes and themes in the sheets *“Codes & Themes - Analysis A”*, *“Codes & Themes - Analysis B”,* and *“Codes & Themes - Analysis C”* rather than deleting them (Appendix 1 & 2). This further exemplifies the authors’ use of transparency to fulfill the principles of dependability and transferability by providing a full description of the whole research process.

5. Delimitations

In the following section, the delimitations of the thesis are presented to establish the thesis' scope.

Firstly, the thesis is delimited to examine KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* from the announcement of Vision 2030 in 2016 to April 6, 2023. As such KSA's potential use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* prior to 2016 will not be examined, as these are perceived to be unrelated to KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to accomplish Vision 2030.

Additionally, the thesis is delimited to examine the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* since KSA's announcement of its Vision 2030 in 2016. Thus, the thesis does not examine the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* prior to 2016 nor the Western world's general perception of KSA. The definition of the Western world is outlined in section 6.4. This delimitation is made based on the consideration that there are vast cultural differences between the different areas of the world (see section 3.3). Consequently, this can lead to different perceptions of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* depending on the definition of the target audience. Thus, to analyze the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, it is crucial to first define the specific target audience whose perception the authors aim to examine. In this thesis, the target audience is defined as and delimited to the Western world. Thus, it is the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* that is analyzed to determine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Hence, the thesis does not examine the global perception nor global effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, as this was deemed too comprehensive given the notion of cultural differences and the limitations regarding the thesis' time horizon and page limit. Furthermore, this delimitation is also based on the authors' linguistic limitations, which prevents the authors from interpreting non-English and non-Danish sources.

Following the thesis' methodological approach of archival research, the thesis is delimited to solely use existing secondary empirical data. As such no new primary data have been gathered nor included in this thesis. In relation to the methodological approach, the sources used for the archival research are delimited to be solely sources in Danish or English, given the authors' linguistic limitations. Another delimitation related to the thesis' methodological approach stems from the gathering of empirical data used for the Thematic Network Analyses (Appendix 1 & 2). Given that there are no theoretical limits regarding how many sources are necessary to gather to conduct a Thematic Network Analysis, the authors decided to delimit the gathering of data for the Thematic Network Analyses based on a combination of a time frame and a self-determined lower limit. This was done to ensure that the gathering of data did not become too limited so that it would damage the validity of the analyses or too excessive so that it would not be possible to submit the thesis within the set time frame. Hence, the gathering of data for the Thematic Network Analyses was delimited to be conducted

between March 13, 2023, and April 6, 2023, with a lower limit of 50 different sources for each Thematic Network Analysis.

6. Definition of terms

In this section, the definitions of the most prominent terms used in the thesis are presented to establish a consensus of what the authors refer to when they use the terms.

6.1 Sportswashing

One of the most prominent terms used in the thesis is the term *sportswashing*. Although the term has been used liberally and simplistically by Western countries and media there is a lack of academic consensus on its definition (Davis et al., 2023). However, one of the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing that to some extent encapsulates the Western media's vast number of different sportswashing definitions is established by Amnesty International. Amnesty International defines sportswashing as nations' use of sports as a strategy to improve their reputation and public perception (Amnesty International Danmark, 2022). Additionally, Amnesty International emphasizes that the term is commonly used to describe how nations, that are known for systematic and severe repression of human rights, use sports as a form of PR and/or propaganda (Amnesty International Danmark, 2022).

However, the authors of this thesis consider Amnesty International's and the other existing definitions of sportswashing to be flawed due to their neglect of cultural differences and the emphasis on sportswashing being a strategy, which will be further discussed in section 10.1.5. Consequently, the authors of the thesis have established their own definition of sportswashing that aims to overcome the previously mentioned flaws of the existing definitions by synthesizing them with the concept of *legitimacy*. Hence, the authors' definition of sportswashing is based on sportswashing being a perception rather than a strategy. This distinction is based on the consideration that it is the individual observer and the observer's corresponding socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions that determine whether the observer considers a nation's use of sports as sportswashing or not. Thus, the authors aim to accommodate the notion of cultural differences by perceiving sportswashing as a perception that is dependent on the individual observer. In this sense, the authors accommodate the notion of cultural differences by incorporating the concept of *legitimacy* and acknowledging that, what people consider to be illegitimate uses of sports, are dependent on the individual observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. By doing so, the authors oppose the idea that what is considered sportswashing is universal, as cultural differences and variations in people's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions can lead to different perceptions of whether nations' use of sports is legitimate or illegitimate. Hence, to ensure that sportswashing as a term was used in a continuous and well-defined matter throughout the thesis, the authors considered defining the term as: *"A negative perception of a nation's use of sports as a legitimation strategy from an observer, due to the observer perceiving the nation's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to give off a false appearance of conformity to the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."*.

This definition of sportswashing encapsulates the interdependency between sportswashing as a perception and the socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions that defines whether an observer perceives a nation's use of sports as being legitimate or illegitimate. Following this definition, an observer's perception of a nation's use of sports being sportswashing indicates that the observer perceives the nation's use of sports as an illegitimate attempt to falsely appear to conform to the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions in an attempt to be perceived as legitimate by the observer.

However, after further reconsideration and deliberation about the phrase *"to give off a false appearance of conformity"*, the authors decided to rephrase the definition of sportswashing to more precisely encapsulate the purpose of *sportswashing*. The phrase *"to give off a false appearance of conformity"* was based on Suchman's (1995) definition of the legitimation strategy to gain *moral legitimacy*, *symbolism*, where an entity can give off a false appearance of conformity to societal ideals to gain *moral legitimacy*. However, after further deliberation and consideration, the authors came to the conclusion that a nation's use of sports doesn't necessarily have to be a strategy to solely gain *moral legitimacy* nor an explicit way of falsely showing conformity to societal ideals. Instead, in alignment with Amnesty International's conceptualization of sportswashing, a nation's use of sports can be perceived as a concealment strategy that conceals a nation's divergences from an observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Thus, this led to the following definition of *sportswashing* that is used throughout the thesis:

"Sportswashing is an observer's negative perception of the purpose of a nation's use of sports as a legitimation strategy being to conceal the nation's divergence from the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."

This definition is based on a synthesis of Oliver's (1991) concealment tactics and Suchman's (1995) definition of *legitimacy* being formed by an observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Thus, this definition accommodates the notion that cultural differences potentially lead to different perceptions of what is considered *sportswashing*, due to people having different and potentially clashing socially constructed systems of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions, that lead to different perceptions of a given nation's use of sports.

The notion of *sportswashing,* being a *negative* perception, is based on the given observer's perception of a given nation's use of *sport as a legitimation strategy* being an attempt to conceal the nation's divergence from the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions. Hence, the observer is aware of the given nation's divergence from the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values,

beliefs, and definitions. Consequently, this leads to the observer negatively perceiving the given nation's use of sports as an attempt to insincerely disguise the nation's disconformity to the observer's socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.

Hence, *sportswashing* describes a specific *perception* of a nation's use of sports as a legitimation strategy, whereas *sports as a legitimation strategy* refers to how a nation uses sports as a strategy to gain/maintain/repair *legitimacy*. In this sense, when the phrase *sports as a legitimation strategy* is used throughout the thesis it refers to how a nation uses sports as a legitimation strategy, whereas the term *sportswashing* refers to a specific perception of a nation's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Furthermore, it is pivotal to emphasize that when the term *sportswashing* is written in italics the authors refer to their definition of *sportswashing*. In contrast, when sportswashing is written in regular font the term refers to the Western media's use of the term. Additionally, the phrase *"socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions"* is henceforth referred to as *"socially constructed value system"* to ease the readability of the thesis.

6.2 Legitimacy

As the definition of *sportswashing* and the concept of a nation's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* are both linked to the concept of *legitimacy*, it is also considered pivotal to define the term *legitimacy*. As this thesis frequently draws upon Suchman's (1995) theoretical framework it is perceived natural to follow his definition of *legitimacy* as being:

"[...] a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

6.3 KSA

Another term that is essential to define is *KSA*. In this thesis, *KSA* is defined as the nation-state known as The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its corresponding nationally owned funds and organizations. Consequently, Saudi Arabian entities such as The Public Investment Fund (PIF), Saudia, and Aramco are defined to be a part of the term *KSA* based on their ties to the Saudi Arabian government. Hence, actions performed by the entities PIF, Saudia, and Aramco are perceived as actions performed by *KSA*.

6.4 The Western world

Following the definition of *KSA* it is equally imperative to outline this thesis' definition of *the Western world*. The definition of *The Western world* is based on Samuel P. Huntington's (1996) characterization of The Western Civilization. As such the term *The Western world* represents the United States as well as Western and

Central Europe. Consequently, the term *Western media* is defined as news media that originates from the previously mentioned areas.

6.5 Effectiveness

In the context of this thesis, the term *effectiveness* refers to whether KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* achieves its intended result instead of measuring whether KSA has accomplished a specific and tangible set of objectives.

6.6 The sporting sector

Throughout the thesis, especially in section 8, the authors refer to the *sporting sector*. The sporting sector refers to the global industry surrounding sports and athletic events, competitions, and organizations.

7. KSA's need for legitimacy

The following section presents a situational analysis of why KSA needs to possess *legitimacy*. Initially, based on Kotler et al.'s (1993) theory on *place marketing*, the analysis examines the external threats to KSA's fiscal health and economic conditions. Subsequently, it is analyzed how KSA intends to address these threats and how these threats lead to the necessity of *legitimacy* for KSA. Hence, this analysis provides the foundation for the subsequent exploration of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

7.1 A potential sickness of KSA leading to new incentives

Kotler et al. (1993) advocate that geographical areas potentially become *sick*. In this sense, *sick* refers to *a place encountering periods of bad fiscal health and/or economic conditions*. Nations experience both cyclical and even prolonged periods of poor health. To ensure that a geographical area does not run out of resources on which to launch a recovery, leading to *chronic depression*, a place needs to be aware of its current condition and potential development. All places are subject to internal and external forces, which can potentially lead to *sickness*. However, these forces are difficult to navigate through, are related to many different stakeholders, and thus require a thorough strategic place marketing approach (Kotler et al., 1993). KSA, as a place, thus has to be aware of these external and internal forces to ensure it will not eventually become *sick*.

The modern state, KSA, was founded in 1932 (*Saudi Arabia - the World Factbook*, n.d.). A few years later, in 1938, an American-owned company, Chevron, discovered the world's largest source of petroleum in Dhahran, KSA. Ever since the discovery of oil in Dhakan, KSA's economy has been reliant on oil and natural gasses. Today, KSA remains a leading producer of oil and natural gas and, as of 2020, it holds about 17% of the world's proven oil reserves (*Saudi Arabia - the World Factbook*, n.d.). Additionally, Dhahran is home to the headquarter of Aramco, the third-largest company in the world based on market cap (CompaniesMarketCap.com, n.d.). Aramco sells oil, gas, and other energy resources to the entire world (Aramco, 2022). Aramco was previously a government-owned company but went public in 2019 with the world's largest IPO which raised USD 25.6 billion for Aramco while the majority of the company remained under KSA's control (CompaniesMarketCap.com, n.d.; Horowitz & Defterios, 2019). Along with other oil and gas-related companies, Aramco constituted almost 90% of KSA's total export in 2018 (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). This indicates KSA's huge financial reliance on fossil fuels (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022).

Kotler et al. (1993) describe a healthy geographical area as a place that is aware of the influence of potential internal and external factors and thus is adaptable to an ever-changing world. In the context of KSA, its heavy financial reliance on fossil fuels in a time where climate changes, sustainability, and green transformation are pushing nations to lessen their reliance on fossil fuels indicates that KSA is far from adaptable, and thus sickness is a potential risk (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). Since the 1980s, diversification has been a

longstanding goal for GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries in general, as it is risky and unpredictable for a country to be as dependent on oil as these countries currently are (Kireyev, 2021). Still, several years passed before the GCC countries, including KSA, dealt with the problem, as oil and gas continued to be considered a global 'necessity good', thus leading to steady exports for the GCC countries (Kireyev, 2021). However, the perception of fossil fuels being a 'necessity good' has started to change as climate change, sustainability, and green transformation have become increasingly important for nations and organizations to address.

Based on Kotler et al.'s (1993) definition of a healthy geographical area, KSA is arguably susceptible to becoming *sick*, as it is influenced by external factors. This was recently exemplified by the drop in oil prices during the COVID-19 pandemic which heavily impacted KSA's economy (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). More than 40% of KSA's GDP has been based on income from oil- and gas-related activities during the last few years, and as the global price of oil and gas dropped drastically during the pandemic, so did KSA's GDP (Shaer, 2022; Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). The aforementioned incident served as a moment of reflection for KSA, as it was made aware of the necessity to diversify its economy into a dynamic and sustainable post-hydrocarbon economy (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). It is estimated that revenues from oil are expected to decline in the face of reductions in global demand starting around 2040, if not sooner (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). Furthermore, although the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has generated economic benefits for KSA, it has also hastened the Western world's planned shift toward renewable energy sources (Shaer, 2022). Thus, the economy of KSA is heavily impacted by external factors due to its reliance on market trends and synergies in fossil fuels and other energy sectors. Consequently, KSA must exhibit adaptability to these external factors to avoid becoming *sick*.

In addition to external factors, a place can also become *sick*, if the place's internal factors are not easily adaptable to the ever-changing world (Kotler et al., 1993). Along with the external factors influencing the health of KSA, the nation is also susceptible to becoming *sick* due to its internal factors. In KSA, women encounter limited job opportunities, which are attributed to the perceived repressive cultural norms that distinguish KSA from most developed economies. Moreover, the government has encountered difficulties in promoting private-sector employment, even among men (Savage, 2022). In 2016, about 70% of Saudis were employed in non-strenuous government jobs. One minister noted that many Saudis worked less than an hour per day (Savage, 2022). KSA's workforce has been unproductive for decades, but this issue was not adequately addressed, since revenues from the oil industry compensated for the lack of innovation or work ethic. Additionally, the completion of infrastructure projects was ensured by immigrant workers from countries such as Pakistan, India, the Philippines, and Bangladesh (Savage, 2022). Further, the youth unemployment rate in KSA is currently at 40%, indicating that to become adaptable, the population's work attitude has to change

significantly (Kabbani & Mimoune, 2022). Additionally, despite education being free in KSA, the universities are known to be of low quality and mainly focus on subjects like theology rather than more practical topics like hard sciences, engineering, and finance (Savage, 2022). Hence, the imperative of KSA's economic diversification and adaptability to external factors is not limited to the energy sector's market trends and tendencies. The country must also address the issue of creating a competitive and motivated future generation that is globally competitive and inclined towards working in the private sector. This is crucial to enhance KSA's adaptability to face the uncertainties of an ever-changing world and prevent KSA's potential sickness.

7.2 The Vision 2030

As mentioned above, KSA has been aware of the necessity to diversify its economy since the 1980s (Kireyev, 2021). The current circumstances have just accelerated KSA's necessity to accommodate the potential sickness by lessening its dependence on oil, thus making KSA more adaptable to external and internal factors. The avoidance of sickness requires *strategic place marketing*. However, Kotler et al. (1993) advocate that before embracing strategic place marketing and its corresponding activities, it is necessary to go through a planning process. This process is threefold, whereas the first part of the process is a diagnosis of the community's condition (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18). As previously outlined, KSA is aware of its diagnosis and the various internal and external factors that have contributed to it. Thus, KSA can be considered to have completed the first part of the planning process.

The second part of the planning process concerns the formulation of a long-term vision to address the community's issues by realistically evaluating its values, resources, and opportunities (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18). Hence, KSA has embraced the second part of the planning process by establishing and communicating its Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The overarching goal of the vision is to ensure long-term prosperity of KSA by transitioning towards a more private sector-driven economy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). As an example, KSA in a recent announcement declared its intention to achieve "net zero" greenhouse gas emissions by 2060. This implies that companies like Aramco, which form a significant portion of KSA's GDP (over 40%) and total exports (80%), must explore alternative sources of revenue well in advance (Welle, 2021). This initiative is part of KSA's first-ever Saudi Green Initiative, which constitutes only a part of the country's Vision 2030. Thus, the primary objective of Vision 2030 is to reduce KSA's economic dependence on oil by promoting the development of new industries, improving public services and infrastructure, as well as enhancing social and cultural opportunities (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016).

According to the crown prince and prime minister of KSA, Mohammed Bin Salman (henceforth MBS), Vision 2030 acknowledges that KSA is rich in natural resources but claims that the country's real wealth lies in the ambition of its people and the potential of its younger generation (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). By

referring to the younger generation in this manner, MBS acknowledges how the high unemployment rate and the idea of work from the population have to change so that the country can become adaptable and competitive as a global economy (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Thus, the above-mentioned examples show that KSA is aware of its diagnosis and is trying to accommodate the potential sickness. Additionally, MBS presents three pillars, which lay the foundation of the objectives of Vision 2030. The first pillar of the vision is KSA's status as the heart of the Arab and Islamic worlds. The second pillar of the vision is KSA's determination to become a global investment powerhouse. The third pillar concerns the utilization of KSA's unique strategic location in terms of transforming the nation into a global hub (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Some of the more specific objectives within these pillars are for instance to transform Aramco from an oil-producing company into a global industrial conglomerate (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Furthermore, KSA claims that the government will become transparent and take accountability for its action, while also welcoming new ideas on how to improve from political and business partners from the rest of the world (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). KSA is determined to become a leading country in providing opportunities for all of its population through education and training, and high-quality services such as employment initiatives, health, housing, and entertainment.

The pillars and objectives within them indicate that KSA has a clear vision of how to treat the current diagnosis and improve its adaptability to the ever-changing world. Thus, in accordance with the second part of the planning process, KSA has formulated a long-term vision to overcome the potential *sickness* (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18). Further, in accordance with the third part of the planning process, KSA has formulated a plan to achieve its vision (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18).

The plan is based on three interrelated themes: *a vibrant society*, *a thriving economy*, and *an ambitious nation*. The first theme, *a vibrant society*, emphasizes the importance of investing in human capital, healthcare, and social services to ensure that all citizens can participate fully in the economic and social life of the country. The second theme, *a thriving economy*, concerns the alignment of the education system with the needs of the job market, fostering entrepreneurship, and supporting small and large businesses alike. It also entails promoting innovation and adopting new technologies to boost productivity and competitiveness. The third theme, *an ambitious nation*, focuses on building an effective, accountable, and high-performing government that develops effective public policies and invests in infrastructure as well as public services to enhance the quality of life of citizens. These themes are designed to help achieve the vision, and they provide guidance for the executive programs that support the realization of Vision 2030. Thus, the themes indicate KSA's attempt to fulfill the third part of the planning process in terms of formulating a plan on how to achieve the vision (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 18).

Consequently, the results of this section show that KSA has completed the three parts of Kotler et al.'s (1993) planning processes, as KSA is aware of its diagnosis, has formulated a long-term vision to address the diagnosis, and has formulated a plan on how to achieve the long-term vision. The completion of the initial planning processes indicates that KSA is ready to proceed with the strategic place marketing process.

7.3 The strategic place marketing process and legitimacy

A prominent part of the strategic place marketing process is to promote a place's value and image so that potential audiences are fully aware of the place's distinctive advantage (Kotler et al., 1993). As mentioned in section 3.1, Kotler et al. (1993) define a *place's image* as "*the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a people have of a place"* (Kotler et al., 1993, p. 141). Similarly, Suchman (1995) defines *legitimacy* as *"a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions"* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Furthermore, Suchman (1995) states: *"Legitimacy is a perception or assumption in that it represents a reaction of observers to the organization as they see it; thus, legitimacy is possessed objectively, yet created subjectively."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Hence, there are clear similarities between Kotler et al.'s (1993) definition of *place image* and Suchman's (1995) definition of *legitimacy* and how *legitimacy* is created and possessed.

Firstly, both concepts are rooted in perception, as it is the observers' perception of the phenomenon that is the determining factor within both concepts. Furthermore, both concepts are also rooted in subjectivity as it is the subjective perception of the observer that determines a *place's image*, just as it is the perception of the observer that determines whether an entity is assigned *legitimacy* (Kotler et al., 1993; Suchman, 1995). Secondly, both *place image* and *legitimacy* can be influenced by various factors, such as communication, behavior, and performance (Kotler et al., 1993; Suchman, 1995). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, both *place image* and *legitimacy* are important for the long-term success and sustainability of an entity. A positive *place image* can attract tourists, investors, and businesses to the place, leading to increased economic activity and employment opportunities (Kotler et al., 1993). Similarly, the possession of *legitimacy* leads to persistence, as audiences are more likely to engage in transactional relationships with entities that they perceive as desirable, proper, or appropriate (Parsons, 1960). Consequently, due to the similarity between the two concepts, this analysis of KSA's potential *sickness* is considered relevant to establish the foundation for the analysis of how KSA attempts to be perceived as legitimate.

The analysis of KSA's potential *sickness* explains the incentives in terms of why KSA needs to possess *legitimacy*. As outlined previously, KSA is in danger of becoming *sick* as the world is decreasing its demand for fossil fuels, which currently constitute the majority of KSA's GDP. Therefore, as previously outlined, KSA

is attempting to diversify its economy and become adaptable to the ever-changing world in order to overcome the potential *sickness* that external factors are contributing to. However, a major factor in terms of the success of KSA's diversification of its economy, is the possession of *legitimacy*, as audiences are more likely to engage in transactional relationships with entities that they perceive as desirable, proper, or appropriate (Parsons, 1960). Furthermore, Meyer & Rowan (1991) advocate that entities that lack *legitimacy* tend to be exposed to claims that they are negligent, irrational, or unnecessary, which consequently makes it harder for them to engage in transactional relations with audiences that possess these attitudes toward the entity. Therefore, KSA's need for *legitimacy* is interpreted as especially relevant due to the potential *sickness* outlined in section 7.1. Previously, KSA's supply of fossil fuels ensured transactional relationships with other entities, as the entities were dependent on KSA's supply of fossil fuels (Al-Osaimi, 2015). However, as the demand for other more sustainable energy sources is currently increasing, these transactional relationships can no longer be taken for granted, as the external entities are becoming less dependent on KSA's supply of fossil fuels. Thus, to ensure the success of the diversification of its economy, KSA needs *legitimacy* to ensure that audiences want to engage in transactional relationships with KSA. Consequently, it is relevant to examine how KSA attempts to be perceived as legitimate to support the realization of Vision 2030's objectives including the diversification of KSA's economy.

7.4 Subconclusion

In conclusion, this analysis indicates why KSA needs *legitimacy* due to the nation potentially becoming *sick*. In the context of *place marketing*, KSA is aware of the external and internal factors, which may potentially lead to KSA becoming *sick*, if KSA does not accommodate these factors in due time. The increase in global demand for sustainable energy sources and the corresponding decrease in global demand for fossil fuels are especially considered important external threats for KSA to overcome, due to KSA's economic dependence on fossil fuels. However, it is concluded that KSA is aware of this external threat and how it potentially leads to KSA becoming *sick* if KSA does not diversify its economy to become more adaptable to the ever-changing world. To overcome the threat of becoming *sick*, KSA has announced a vision for the future, along with a plan for how to achieve it. KSA's Vision 2030 especially emphasizes KSA's aim to diversify its economy. In sum, the overarching goal of the vision is to ensure the long-term prosperity of KSA by transitioning towards a more private sector-driven economy. However, it is concluded that to accomplish its Vision 2030, KSA needs to possess *legitimacy*, as, according to Parsons (1960), audiences are more likely to engage in transactional relationships with entities that they perceive as desirable, proper, or appropriate - or in other words legitimate. In the past, KSA established transactional relationships with other entities based on its vast supply of fossil fuels and the entities significant reliance on fossil fuels. This was due to the entities' reliance on KSA's fossil fuel supply as a critical resource. However, with the growing demand for sustainable energy sources, KSA's transactional relationships are no longer ensured, as external entities are working towards becoming less

dependent on KSA's supply of fossil fuels. Therefore, it is concluded that KSA's possession of *legitimacy* is important to ensure that KSA's target audiences are willing to engage in transactional relationships with KSA. Hence, the possession of *legitimacy* is concluded as pivotal to support the realization of KSA's Vision 2030.

8. KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

Based on the findings in section 7, the following analysis aims to examine how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The analysis is based on a two-step Thematic Network Analysis. The first part of the analysis examines a selection of KSA's most prominent strategic initiatives that have been presented or conducted since the announcement of "Vision 2030" and KSA's communication about these strategic initiatives, to unveil the external perception that KSA tries to establish of itself. Subsequently, the excerpts used for the first part of the Thematic Network Analysis are reduced to excerpts that only concern KSA's sports engagement presented or conducted since the announcement of "Vision 2030" and KSA's corresponding communication about these, to examine KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

8.1 Thematic Network Analysis A - KSA's strategic initiatives and communication

Thematic Network Analysis A is based on an interpretive analysis of 352 different excerpts from 92 different sources (Appendix 1). Following Attride-Sterling's (2001) methodological approach the different sources were dissected into manageable and meaningful text segments (excerpts) through the use of a coding framework. The aim of the coding framework, used for Thematic Network Analysis A, was to unveil the external perception that KSA tries to establish of itself. Thus, the different excerpts from the sources were coded based on the recurrent topics occurring in the sources in order to grasp the most prominent topics that KSA was trying to express.

Following the dissection of the sources and the corresponding codification of the dissected excerpts, the different excerpts and codes were analyzed and interpreted in order to extract the most significant themes in the coded text segments (Appendix 1). However, before proceeding with this process, the different codes and corresponding excerpts were reread to be able to reassess the different codes to ensure that the codes succinctly summarize what kind of external perception KSA is trying to establish of itself and how it aims to establish it. Following the reassessment, the following codes were deleted: *"Sports investment"*, *"The Gulf States",* and *"Sportswashing"*. The code *"The Gulf States"* and the corresponding excerpts were fully removed from Thematic Network Analysis A, as the reassessment of the code and the corresponding excerpts showed that there was no notable relation between the contents of the excerpt and how KSA expresses itself, which the aim of the coding framework for Thematic Network Analysis A was based on. The code *"Sportswashing"* was removed because the code was found to be used in an inconsistent manner to try to derive a salient background motive for KSA's engagement in sports. Thus, based on the nature of the other codes used in Thematic Network Analysis A and the interpretation of the other excerpts covering KSA's strategic initiatives and communication of these initiatives, it was through a reassessment of the code *"Sportswashing",* and its related excerpts deemed that the code did not fit within the aim of the coding framework and that the corresponding excerpts would be better suited under different codes. This recodification is shown in Appendix 1 in the sheet "Tweets, press

releases, and news articles" in the column "Previous codes" which shows the excerpts that have previously been coded as *"Sportswashing"* (Appendix 1). Additionally, the excerpts that were previously coded as *"Sports investment"* was re-coded as the reassessment of the excerpts showed that the most prominent topics in the excerpts were a better fit under some of the existing codes such as *"Sporting events"* or *"International sport"*. This decision was based on the observation that the excerpts which were previously coded as *"Sports investment"* primarily concerned sporting events that KSA was hosting or KSA's international sporting partnerships, which the codes *"Sporting events"* and *"International sport"* was already used as codes for respectively. Thus, excerpts that had previously been coded as *"Sports investment"* was re-coded to *"Sporting events"* or *"International sport"* to ensure that the codes used for the basis of Thematic Network Analysis A were both discrete and precise (Appendix 1). Following the same process as with the code *"Sports investment"* multiple of the excerpts that had been previously coded as *"International sport"* were reassessed and assigned other existing codes that better described the main topics of the respective excerpts, to ensure coherence between the excerpts and the corresponding codes (Appendix 1).

Through an interpretive analytical approach, it was possible to examine and outline common themes that related the different codes to one another. Thus, following Attride-Sterling's (2001) methodological approach, the different codes, derived from the excerpts, were connected through similarities, thus establishing basic themes. This approach led to the following basic themes: *"KSA's Governmental Leadership", "A modern KSA", "Culture and values of KSA", "Economic KSA", "KSA exploring the world", "The world exploring KSA", "Sport/Entertainment in KSA"*, and *"Western values"* (Appendix 1). Subsequently, following Attride-Sterling's (2001) methodological approach, the basic themes were grouped into organizing themes in an attempt to derive the larger shared underlying topics/themes that the basic themes possessed. This led to the following organizing themes: *"National KSA"* and *"International KSA"* (Appendix 1). The organizing theme *"National KSA"* covers how KSA is developing nationally in terms of the strategic initiatives that are supporting or strengthening KSA's current identity, whereas *"International KSA"* covers how KSA interacts with the international world, and thus how KSA aims to be perceived internationally (Appendix 1). The two organizing themes were then subsequently grouped under the global theme *"KSA 2030"* (Appendix 1). The global theme *"KSA 2030"* encapsulates the main proposition that the organizing themes cover in the sense that the organizing themes together have the shared proposition of how KSA wants its national identity to be as well as how the nation wants to be perceived in the year 2030. Put in another way, the global theme *"KSA 2030"* encapsulates how KSA expresses it wants the future of the nation to be and be perceived. When establishing the basic, organizing, and global theme(s) the authors continuously added their comments and thoughts throughout the process to ensure a high degree of transparency in terms of the thoughts providing the foundation of the development of the themes. These comments and thoughts can be found in Appendix 1. The

development of the different basic themes, organizing themes, and global theme led to the development of thematic network A, which is visualized below:

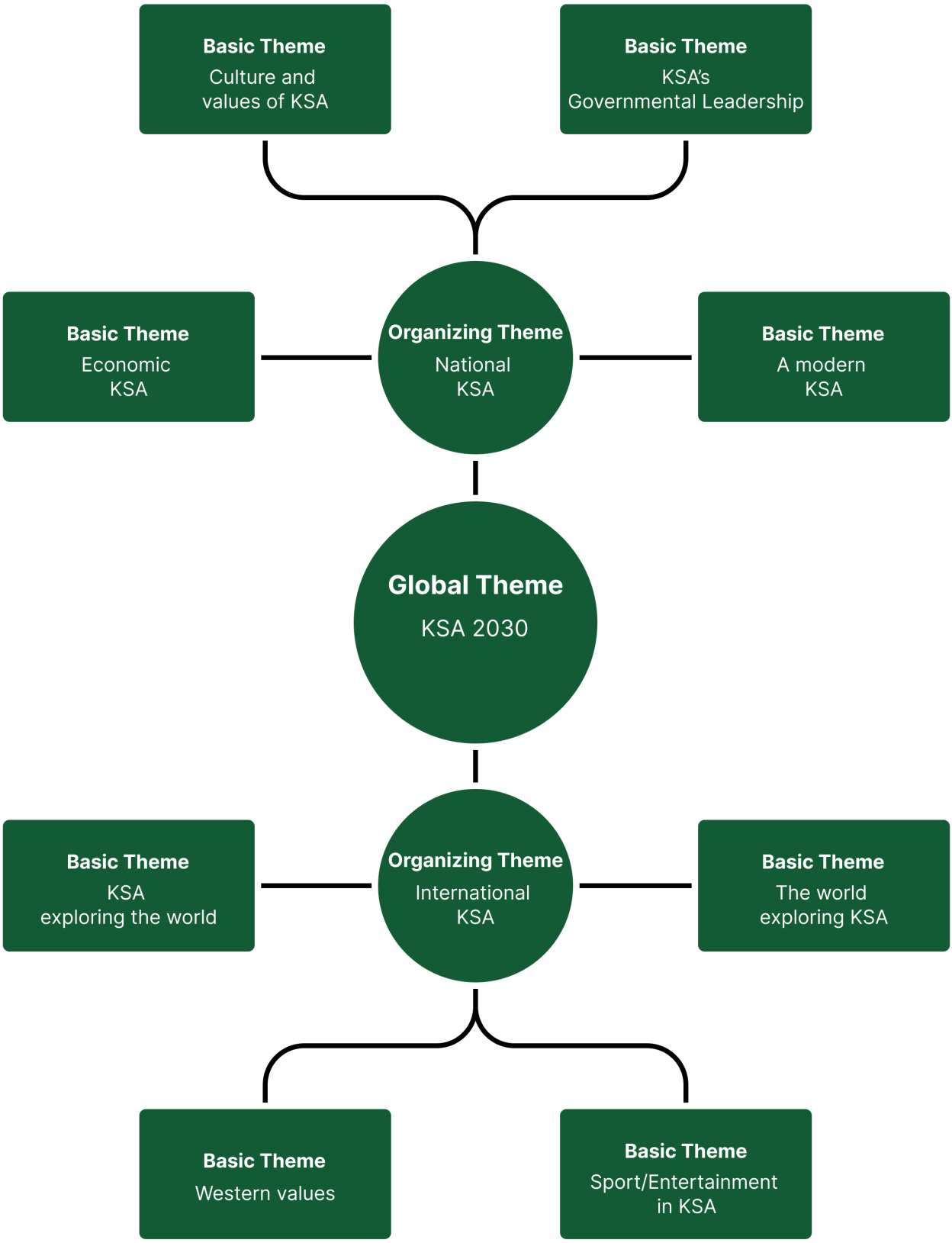

Figure 8.1: Thematic network A

The development of thematic network A provided the authors with an overview of how KSA wants to be perceived by 2030. Furthermore, the establishment of basic, organizing, and global themes provided an understanding of how the different strategic initiatives and their communication of them related to one another in terms of working towards the establishment of the future KSA and the international perception of the nation. Based on this newfound comprehensive understanding of how KSA wants the future of the nation to look, as well as be perceived internationally, the excerpts derived from the original sources used for the development of thematic network A were revisited and interpreted through the lens of *legitimacy* and sports. This abductive approach made it possible to reinterpret the data (the excerpts) through a combination of the empirical understanding gained from the development of thematic network A and the theoretical scope of *legitimacy* to further understand how KSA's strategic initiatives and communication within sports are perceived as means to legitimize KSA.

8.2 Thematic Network Analysis B - The perspective of legitimacy

The purpose of reassessing the excerpts used for Thematic Network Analysis A through the lens of *legitimacy* and sports was to be able to interpret KSA's engagement in sporting activities to gain, maintain, or repair *legitimacy*. In this sense, the scope of Thematic Network Analysis A is reduced from examining KSA's most prominent strategic initiatives in the most prominent strategic sectors and the corresponding communication of the strategic initiatives to the strategic initiatives and communication of these within the sporting sector. Thus, the scope of Thematic Network Analysis B is more limited and focused, than Thematic Network Analysis A, as it is solely sporting initiatives that are interpreted and coded. The reduction of the scope is based on the thesis' aim to examine how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*, which is why it is considered relevant to reduce the scope of Thematic Network Analysis B to solely KSA's engagement in sports. However, it is worth noting that Thematic Network Analysis A examined how KSA generally expresses itself through strategic initiatives and the communication of these initiatives provided a thorough understanding of how KSA wants to be perceived by 2030. Consequently, Thematic Network Analysis A provided the necessary empirical understanding of the larger vision that KSA has for the future, which developed the basis for Thematic Network Analysis B of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*. In other words, the Thematic Network Analysis of the sources and excerpts in Thematic Network Analysis A provided a more general knowledge of KSA's strategic initiatives, whereas Thematic Network Analysis B aims to provide more specific knowledge about how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

As the aim of Thematic Network Analysis B is to understand how KSA uses sports as a legitimation strategy, it was necessary to reassess the excerpts used for Thematic Network Analysis A and interpret whether the excerpts were sports-related or not to determine whether they were relevant for Thematic Network Analysis B. By doing so, the number of sources was reduced to 83 and the number of excerpts was reduced to 134 as

nine of the sources and 218 of the excerpts were unrelated to sport (Appendix 1). Subsequently, the remaining sports-related excerpts were reassessed and reinterpreted through the scope of *legitimacy* in order to recode the excerpts based on Suchman's (1995) "Legitimation strategies". Thus, in contrast to the approach in Thematic Network Analysis A, where the coding framework was based on specific recurring topics in the excerpts, the coding framework in Thematic Network Analysis B is based on a set of theoretical constructs, in terms of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies, that provide the basis for the recodification of the sports-related excerpts.

As mentioned in section 3.2.2, Suchman (1995) presents different strategies for gaining, maintaining, or repairing *legitimacy* in an organizational context. However, it is worth noting that Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies in this thesis are elevated from the organizational level to an (inter)national level, as the studied subject in this thesis is the nation KSA's attempt to legitimize the country. In this sense, Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies are examined in another context, in terms of how nations attempt to gain, maintain, or repair *legitimacy*. Suchman's (1995) different legitimation strategies differ, depending on whether the aim is to gain, maintain or repair *legitimacy*. Furthermore, Suchman (1995) defines both general legitimation strategies that can be utilized to gain/maintain/repair *legitimacy* in general and specific legitimation strategies that can be utilized if the aim is to specifically gain/maintain/repair either pragmatic, moral, or *cognitive legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, the 134 sports-related excerpts were revisited and reinterpreted based on Suchman's (1995) different legitimation strategies and their corresponding definitions, in order to interpret whether it was possible to detect any salient strategies to either gain, maintain, or repair *legitimacy*.

Upon the revisitation of the different sports-related excerpts, it was found that five of the excerpts didn't indicate any explicit or salient legitimation strategy and these were thus discarded alongside the non-sports-related excerpts. To determine the "Legitimation code" (see columns "Legitimation Code" in Appendix 1) for the remaining sports-related excerpts an interpretive approach was used, where the excerpts were rigorously re-read and re-interpreted through the lens of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies and their corresponding definitions. Through this interpretive approach, it was possible to first extract the salient *legitimacy* "purpose" in the excerpts in terms of whether the aim was to gain, maintain or repair *legitimacy*. Subsequently, it was interpreted what the general "legitimation strategy" detected in the excerpts was and what kind of "*legitimacy*" the excerpts indicated that KSA strived to gain/maintain/repair to determine the specific legitimation strategies that were linked to the different excerpts. Based on these interpretations of the excerpts through the lens of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies, it was possible to assign the remaining sports-related excerpts a "legitimation code" that expresses the excerpts' salient legitimation strategies (Appendix 1). Consequently, this approach made it possible to determine early in the analytical process that the salient purpose of the

excerpts in terms of *legitimacy* was to *gain legitimacy*, as all of the sports-related excerpts were interpreted to have the purpose "gain" (Appendix 1). This interpretation was based on the continuous coherence between the excerpts and Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies for gaining *legitimacy*, which will be further elaborated upon in sections 8.2.2 to 8.2.4. However, to determine whether the purpose of KSA's legitimation strategies was to gain either pragmatic, moral, cognitive, or a combination of them all, it was necessary to further develop and analyze the Thematic Network by establishing the basic, organizing, and global theme(s) of Thematic Network Analysis B to fully understand how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

Hence, continuing with Thematic Network Analysis B, the interpretive approach led to the development of 25 different "Legitimation codes" (Appendix 1). The 25 different codes and corresponding excerpts were then thoroughly analyzed and interpreted again in order to identify any common themes in the coded text segments that could provide the basis for Thematic Network Analysis B's basic themes. This led to the development of the seven basic themes: *"Cognitive legitimacy based on the development of national sports and sports infrastructure", "Pragmatic legitimacy via association to Western sports brands as a mean to attain cognitive legitimacy", "Moral legitimacy through gender equality", "Moral legitimacy through youth development and education", "Moral legitimacy through population wellness", Moral legitimacy through Western ethics",* and *"Moral Legitimacy through sustainability"*(Appendix 1). Just as with the development of the legitimation codes, the basic themes were developed through the lens of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies. Consequently, the basic themes were based on a combination of what kind of *legitimacy* the legitimation codes expressed that KSA strives for (Pragmatic, Moral, Cognitive, or a combination of two) and how KSA strives to gain it (Appendix 1).

A similar, but perhaps more general approach was used for the development of the organizing theme where the basic themes were grouped based solely on what kind of *legitimacy* they were linked to (Appendix 1). This led to the development of the following three organizing themes: *"Cognitive legitimacy", "Cognitive/Pragmatic legitimacy",* and *"Moral legitimacy"* (Appendix 1). It is worth noting that *pragmatic legitimacy* is not defined as its own organizing theme, despite it being one of Suchman's (1995) three defined types of legitimacies. Instead, it is combined with cognitive *legitimacy*, despite the fact that cognitive *legitimacy* also constitutes its own organizing theme (Appendix 1). The underlying reason for this particular construction of the organizing themes and the, to some extent reinterpretation of Suchman's (1995) legitimacies, stems from the interpretative nature of the analytical approach used for the Thematic Network Analysis. When interpreting the different sports-related excerpts to determine their legitimation codes it was in some instances perceived to be difficult to interpret whether some of the excerpts indicated strategies to gain *pragmatic* or *cognitive legitimacy*. The difficulties arose especially around the excerpts concerning KSA's collaboration with Western sporting brands, and entities, as on the one hand the singular collaborations were

interpreted to be strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, but on the other hand, the greater whole of all the collaborations with Western sporting-brands, and entities was perceived as a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*. This approach made it possible to reveal how the collaborations with different Western sporting brands and entities on their own were perceived to be strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, but at the same time also being aware of how the combination of, and synergy between, the different collaborations indicated a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*, which will be further elaborated in section 8.2.3.

Lastly, the organizing themes were grouped under the global theme of Thematic Network Analysis B *"Legitimacy"* (Appendix 1). The global theme *"Legitimacy"* perfectly encapsulates the main proposition of the organizing themes *"Cognitive legitimacy", "Cognitive/Pragmatic legitimacy",* and *"Moral legitimacy"* as the common factor for them is *legitimacy*. Furthermore, the global theme *"Legitimacy"* is also consistent with the construction of Thematic Network Analysis B being based on the perspective of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies, as *legitimacy* is the core of his legitimation strategies. Furthermore, similarly to the establishment of Thematic Network Analysis A, the authors have continuously added their comments and thoughts throughout the process to ensure a high degree of transparency in terms of the thoughts providing the foundation of the development of the themes. These comments and thoughts can be found in Appendix 1. Consequently, the development of the basic themes, organizing themes, and global theme of Thematic Network Analysis B led to the establishment of thematic network B which is visualized below:

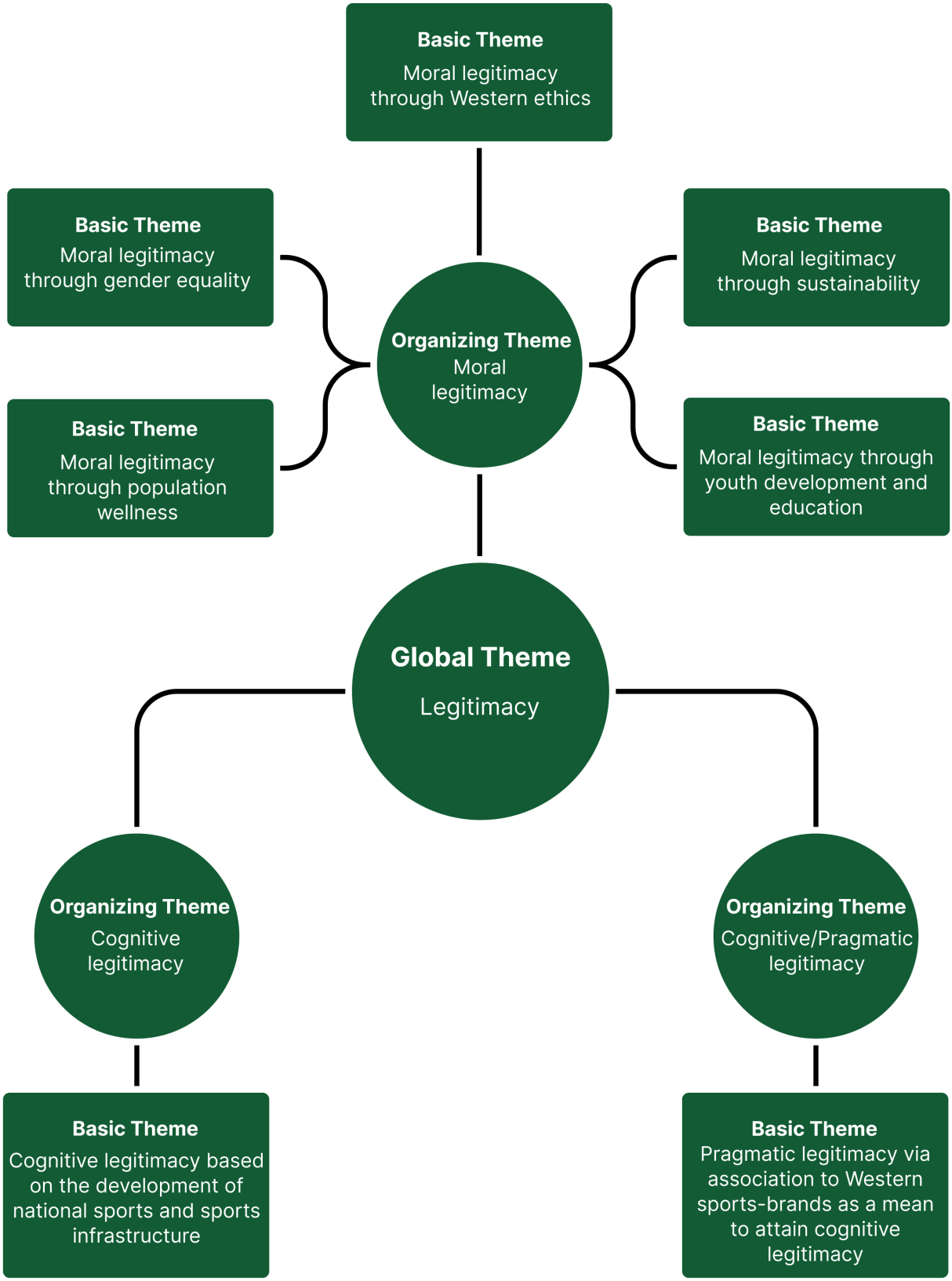

Figure 8.2: Thematic network B

8.2.1 Exploration of the Thematic Network - KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to gain legitimacy

Following the completion and visualization of the thematic network for Thematic Network Analysis B, the key constituents of Thematic Network B are analyzed using Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to interpret how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy*. Consequently, Thematic Network Analysis B is assessed to analyze how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*. However, before doing so, it is pivotal to define the audience from which KSA is trying to gain *legitimacy*, as the perception and effectiveness of the legitimation strategies may differ significantly depending on the target audience (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, the Western world, which is defined in section 6.4, is chosen as the target audience in the analysis from which KSA attempts to gain *legitimacy* from. Hence, KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is analyzed with the previously mentioned target audience in mind.

8.2.2 KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to gain moral legitimacy

The first area in Thematic Network B that will be analyzed in the scope of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies is the organizing theme *"Moral legitimacy"* and its related basic themes, legitimation codes, excerpts, and sources.

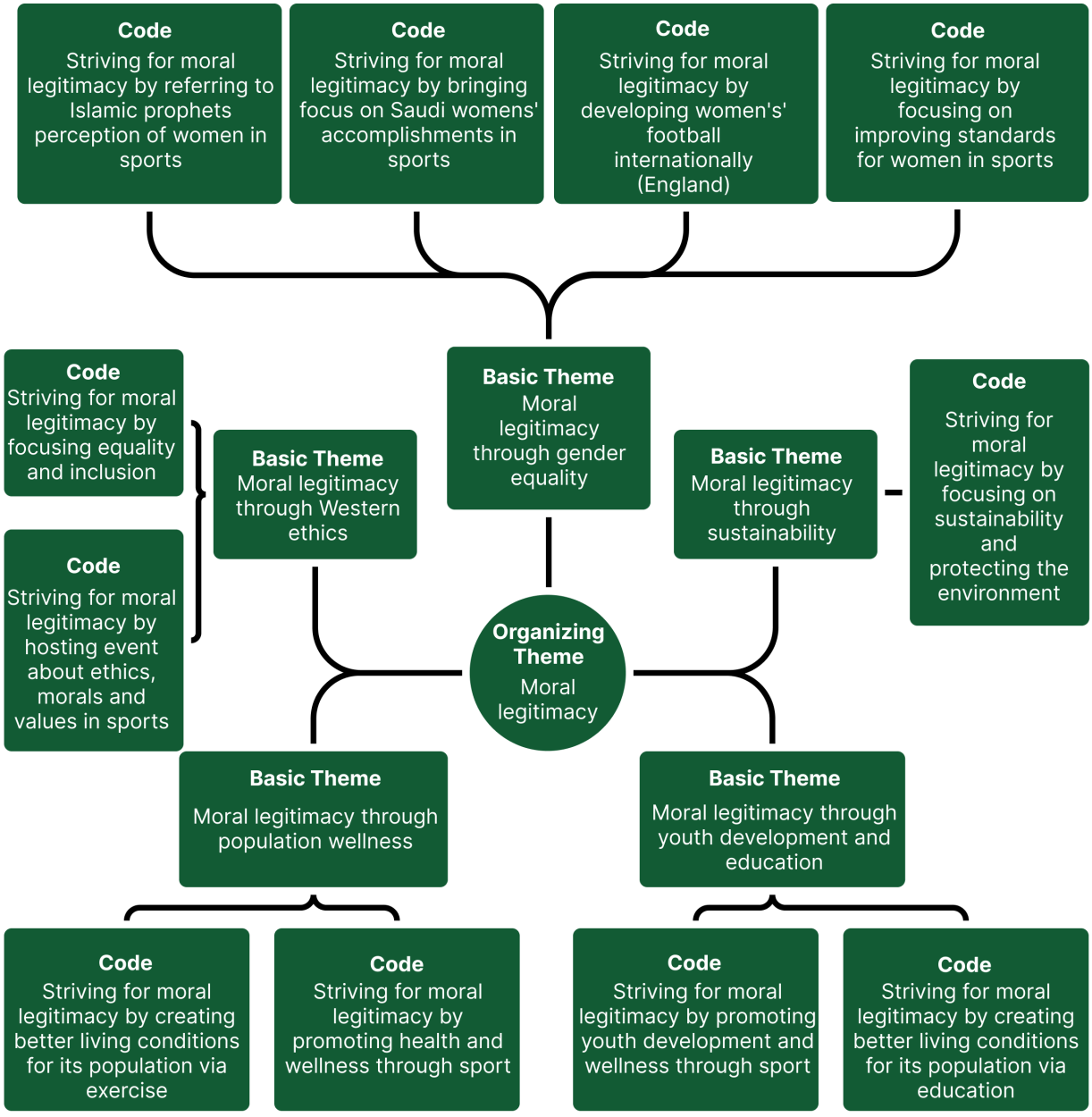

Figure 8.3: Moral legitimacy

As the excerpts in Thematic Network Analysis B show, KSA has engaged in multiple different initiatives to employ high moral standards as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* (Appendix 1; Suchman, 1995). *Moral legitimacy* is defined as a positive normative evaluation of the organization, in this case, the nation, and its activities (Suchman, 1995). In this sense *moral legitimacy* is assigned to an entity by the observer based on the notion of whether the entity's performed activity is the "right thing to do", or in other words whether the entity is doing what is morally correct (Suchman, 1995). One of the strategies to gain *moral legitimacy* is conforming to ideals (Suchman, 1995). By conforming to ideals, the given entity expresses its intent to incorporate the environment's principled ideals in terms of following the preexisting institutional logic of what is perceived to

be morally correct behavior (Suchman, 1995). One of the strategies to do so is *symbolism* where the entity in question offers symbolic displays of how the entity is doing what is morally right within the preexisting institutional logic (Suchman, 1995). This strategy is exemplified by KSA through the country's continuous symbolic displays in national media of Saudi Arabian women's increased participation and accomplishments in sports (Appendix 1). By continuously expressing how Saudi Arabian women are participating and excelling in sports, KSA shows the Western world that KSA is attempting to conform to Western ideals of how women should be treated, by granting them access to sports. In this sense, KSA is using the symbolic displays to manifest that the country is attempting to operate within the Western world's preexisting institutional logic of how women should be treated. Likewise, KSA's use of symbolism as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* is expressed through its hosting of international forums about moral and ethical values in sports, its development of national sports programs, and its focus on sustainability in sports which all symbolize KSA's attempt to conform to Western moral ideals (Saudi Press Agency, n.d.a; Arab News, 2022a; Mee, 2023).

However, while *symbolism* as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* can be a way of indicating the entity's innate attempt to act within the preexisting institutional logic of what is morally right, it can also be used as a smokescreen to try to cover up the entity's immoral behavior (Suchman, 1995). Consequently, in the case of KSA, the symbolic displays of women in sports, etc. as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* by indicating that KSA is conforming to Western moral ideals, might be a genuine attempt from KSA to institutionalize the Western world's moral ideals. However, it can also be a facade covering KSA's immoral institutional structures and procedures, thus establishing a false appearance of conformity to the Western world's moral ideals.

In relation to this point it is relevant to draw upon Suchman's (1995) notion of how/when *legitimacy* is assigned to an entity: *"Legitimacy is a perception or assumption in that it represents a reaction of observers to the organization as they see it; thus, legitimacy is possessed objectively, yet created subjectively. An organization may diverge dramatically from societal norms yet retain legitimacy because the divergence goes unnoticed."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Thus, in the case that KSA's use of symbolism as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* is just a facade covering KSA's immoral institutional structures and procedures, it can still serve as an effective strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* if KSA's immoral institutional structures and procedures go unnoticed. The effectiveness of KSA's use of symbolism as a strategy to gain *moral legitimacy* is further examined in section 9.

8.2.3 KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to gain cognitive/pragmatic legitimacy

The second area in Thematic Network B that will be analyzed in the scope of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies is the organizing theme *"Cognitive/Pragmatic legitimacy"* and its related basic theme, legitimation codes, excerpts, and sources.

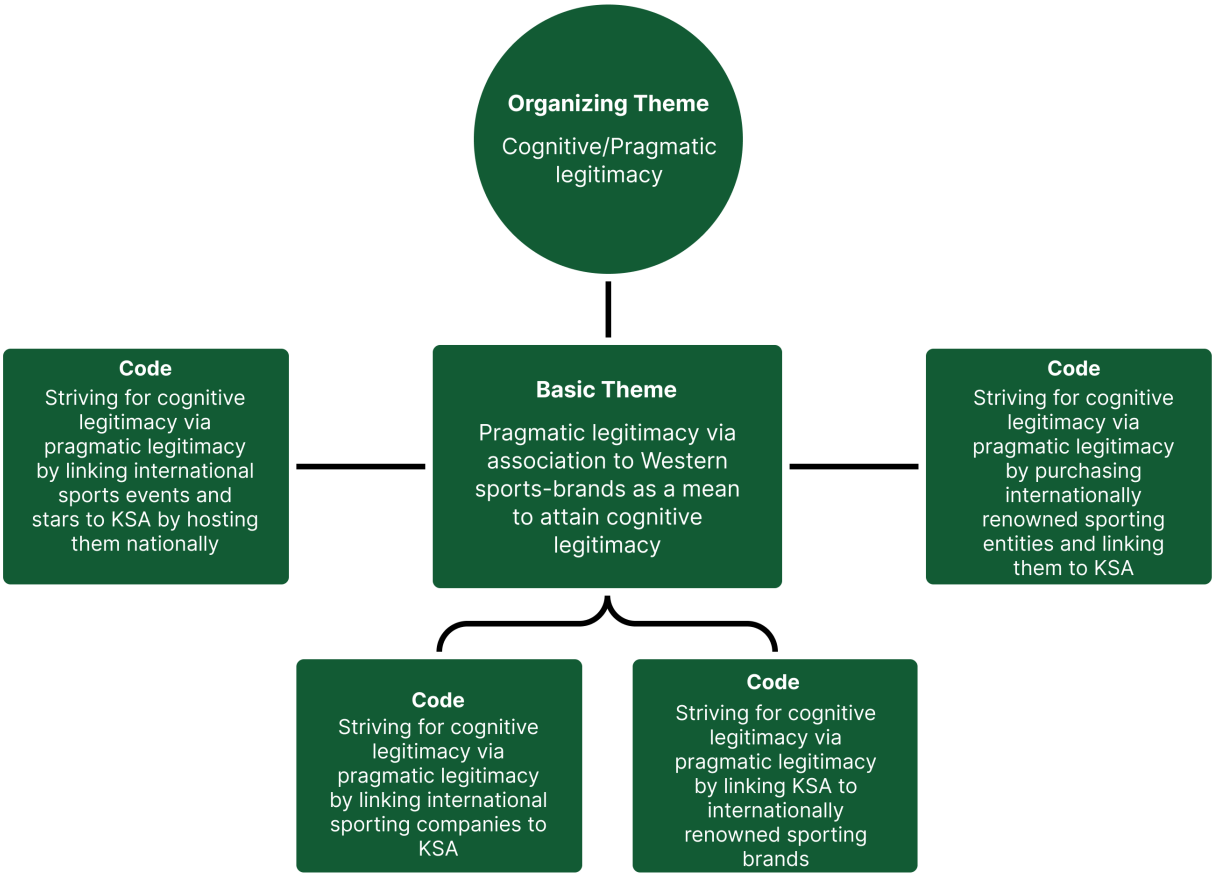

Figure 8.4: Pragmatic legitimacy

As mentioned in section 8.2 this organizing theme differs from the other two organizing themes, as it is constituted by a combination of two kinds of legitimacies rather than being based on a single *legitimacy*. As previously mentioned, this is due to the conflicting nature of the individual excerpts indicating strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, whereas the combination of the excerpts indicates a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*. This duality will be further examined in this section. This will be done by firstly highlighting and analyzing how the most prominent strategic initiatives within this organizing theme individually are interpreted as legitimation strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. Subsequently, the different initiatives will be linked to each other to examine how the initiatives collectively are perceived to be a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*.

As exemplified by the excerpts in Thematic Network Analysis B, KSA has invested in a great number of different sporting initiatives and events both nationally and internationally (Appendix 1). However, KSA's three most prominent initiatives within the sporting sector are perceived to be the takeover of Newcastle United FC, the establishment of LIV Golf, and KSA's collaboration with Formula 1. Consequently, the analysis will primarily be based on how these initiatives are perceived as strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* individually. Subsequently, the KSA's different initiatives related to the organizing theme *"Cognitive/Pragmatic legitimacy"* are analyzed collectively to examine how these initiatives together are perceived as a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*.

Since 2021 KSA's track in Jeddah has been on the Formula 1 calendar every season and is expected to be for the foreseeable future until the new track in Qiddiya is ready (Haldenby, 2023a). Additionally, KSA strengthened its relation to Formula 1 as Aramco became one of the main sponsors of Formula 1 in 2020 (Parker, 2022). The relation to Formula 1 was further strengthened by Aramco becoming the strategic partner of Aston Martin's Formula 1 team for the 2022 season leading to the team being called Aston Martin Aramco Cognizant Formula 1™ Team (Saudi Aramco, n.d). Furthermore, KSA's airline company, Saudia, has become a sponsor of Aston Martin along with Aramco (Khaled, 2023a).

KSA's collaboration with both Aston Martin and Formula 1 is perceived to be a legitimation strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by conforming to environments (Suchman, 1995). Conforming to environments is the most passive strategy to gain *legitimacy*, and implies that the organization, or in this case the nation, attempts to position itself within a preexisting institutional regime, thus signaling allegiance to the cultural order and established institutional logics (Suchman, 1995). Hence, the overarching strategy of trying to gain *legitimacy* by conforming to environments is for the entity to indicate that its actions lie within the target audience's preexisting expectations of how an entity is expected to act. One of the strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by conforming to the environment is to *respond to client needs* in terms of meeting the substantive needs of various audiences (Suchman, 1995). By hosting Formula 1 races in Jeddah, KSA is perceived to attempt to respond to the substantive needs of Formula 1 fans by providing them with the opportunity to follow the sport in KSA. In more general terms KSA is attempting to conform to the Formula 1 fans' substantive need or demand for Formula 1, by hosting races in KSA. Thus, KSA attempts to make the nation look more desirable, proper, and appropriate to the Formula 1 fans, by pledging allegiance to the cultural order and institutional logic of Formula 1 through the hosting of Formula 1 races.

Another example of KSA's strategic attempt to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by attempting to respond to the substantive needs of the target audience is KSA's establishment of LIV Golf, a competitor to the world-famous PGA Tour (Washburn, 2023). By developing LIV Golf, KSA is perceived to try to meet the needs of golf fans

by disrupting the status quo of the golfing world and trying to *"build on and complement the existing format of professional golf and take it to new levels of excitement and engagement with generations of fans"* (LIV Golf, 2023a) through team-based competitions and post-tournament parties (Panja & Das, 2023). Consequently, the establishment of LIV Golf is perceived as a strategy by KSA to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* from golf fans, by attempting to accommodate their need for golf and their interest in the positive development of the sport.

Similarly, KSA's takeover of Newcastle United FC is also perceived to be a strategic attempt to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by attempting to respond to the substantive needs of Newcastle United Fans. By purchasing Newcastle United FC, KSA is perceived to meet the Newcastle United Fans' need for sporting success, by investing in the development of the club (Waugh, 2023). What makes the takeover and development of Newcastle United FC further compelling for KSA from the perspective of *legitimacy* is that Newcastle United FC fans under the previous owner Mike Ashley had been deprived of sporting success, presumably making KSA attempt to meet the fans' substantive need for sporting success even more appealing (Bate, 2021).

Another way to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by conforming to environments is by *building reputation* which sees the organization, in this case, the nation, using its strong reputation in related activities as a strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995). By hosting Formula 1 races KSA builds upon its *reputation* as a sporting nation, by linking one of the world's most viewed sports to the nation. The hosting of Formula 1 races combined with KSA's hosting of many other sporting events such as Formula E, The Italian Super Cup, and the boxing matches Jake Paul vs. Tommy Fury and Anthony Joshua vs. Andy Ruiz sees KSA build a strong reputation within different sports (King, 2022; Arab News, 2023a; Khaled, 2023b). Another way of building a reputation as a strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* is by trading on the reputation of key personnel in previous endeavors (Suchman, 1995). KSA's use of this strategy is exemplified by its appointment of Greg Norman, a former PGA Tour Professional, as CEO of LIV Golf (Arab News, 2021a). The appointment of Greg Norman as CEO for LIV Golf is expected to build upon LIV Golf and KSA's reputation within golf given his reputation in previous endeavors within professional golf, enabling KSA to trade upon his reputation as a strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. Consequently, KSA can use its strong reputation within different sports as a dispositional appeal to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* when engaging in new sporting activities by trading on the country's reputation in related sporting activities.

The dispositional approach of building up or leveraging a strong reputation in related activities can be reinforced by the use of *character references*, who are willing to attest to the inherent trustworthiness of the unverified entity (Suchman, 1995). By collaborating with Aston Martin and Formula 1 KSA is perceived to make use of *character references* in the sense that collaboration acts as a seal of approval of KSA's innate

reliability from Aston Martin and Formula 1 (Arab News, 2023b; Parker, 2022). Aston Martin and Formula 1 are both perceived to be well-renowned organizations internationally. Thus, their collaboration and/or partnership with KSA via Aramco indicates that both Aston Martin and Formula 1 perceive KSA as a legitimate partner whose reliability they are willing to vouch for. Similarly, KSA collaboration with other international sporting entities and personalities, such as the Royal Spanish Football Federation *(the organizing body of the Supercopa de España hosted in KSA in 2023)*, Lega Serie A *(the organizing body of the Supercoppa Italiana hosted in KSA in 2023)*, FIFA *(The organizing body of the FIFA Club World Cup, which KSA is hosting in 2023)*, and Cristiano Ronaldo *(World famous footballer playing for Al-Nassr in KSA),* can be perceived as a strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through character references as the organizations or individuals are indirectly vouching for KSA's trustworthiness by collaborating with the nation (Associated Press, 2023a; Khaled, 2023b; Duerden, 2023a; Duerden, 2023b).

Additionally, before PIF purchased Newcastle United FC, PIF's executives were required to complete the Premier League's Owners' and Directors' test to show that it fulfills the requirements for being the owner of a Premier League club (Klein, 2021). The completion of this test is also perceived to establish another character reference for KSA, as the Premier League is vouching for PIF's reliability and properness by acknowledging that PIF fulfills the requirements for being perceived as proper owners. Equivalently, KSA's strategy to convince PGA Tour professionals to transfer to LIV Golf is also perceived as a strategy to establish character references as the PGA Tour professionals that transfer to LIV Golf indirectly vouch for LIV Golf's innate reliability by leaving the PGA Tour in favor for LIV Golf (Schlabach, 2022). Thus, Western sports stars' and entities' collaboration and/or approval of KSA's engagement in the sporting sector becomes a way of legitimizing KSA's engagement in sports, as they become character references that KSA can strategically utilize in its strategic attempt to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. However, Suchman (1995) notes that entities can rarely rely solely on dispositional appeals as the assumption of good character is generally rooted in an established record of consistent performance. As such the sole dependence on dispositional appeals, such as *character references* and *reputation,* rarely proves to be effective strategies for gaining *pragmatic legitimacy,* as the strategies need to be supported by actual proof that the entity is able to meet the substantiate needs of the audience (Suchman, 1995). Thus, KSA's reliance on character references from well-renowned Western sporting entities and personalities, as well as KSA's attempt to build a reputation within the sporting world, by hosting and investing in different sports, might become hollow attempts to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* if KSA fails to respond to the target audience's needs. In other words, KSA can eagerly try to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through external partners vouching for KSA's ability and reliability, but if the target audience fails to perceive these external claims as legitimate based on a perception that KSA is unable to respond to their needs or lack an established record of consistent performance, then KSA's strategy of gaining *pragmatic*

legitimacy through dispositional appeals is expected to be ineffective. The effectiveness of KSA's attempt to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through dispositional appeals is further examined in section 9.4.1.

Following the analysis of how KSA attempts to strategically gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through the use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* it is analyzed how KSA through the combination of the different initiatives strives for *cognitive legitimacy* in the form of *taken-for-grantedness* (Suchman, 1995). Taken-for-grantedness is defined as both the most subtle and the most powerful source of *legitimacy* as the legitimated entity becomes unassailable by construction due to the audience being unable to envision alternatives, thus making challenges to the legitimated entity impossible (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, the legitimized entity is perceived as *necessary* or *inevitable* based on some taken-for-granted cultural account (Suchman, 1995). Thus, in contrast to *moral* and *pragmatic legitimacy*, *cognitive legitimacy* is not based on a normative evaluation of the given entity, but rather a general set of *legitimacy* dynamics based on cognition (Suchman, 1995).

KSA's legitimation strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* are perceived to be predominantly strategic attempts to gain exchange *legitimacy* by seeking to exchange engagement and investments in the sporting sector for support from its target audience. *Exchange legitimacy* is according to Suchman (1995) *episodic*, meaning that it is assigned based on the episodic issue of whether the organization and its observers share common interests. In contrast, taken-for-grantedness as a form of *cognitive legitimacy* is according to Suchman (1995) *continual*, meaning that it is assigned based on the more general perception of whether the organization "has good character". In this sense, KSA is perceived to attempt to convert the *episodic* exchange *legitimacy* (pragmatic) that KSA expects to gain through its involvement in the sporting sector to *continual legitimacy* in the form of taken-for-grantedness (cognitive legitimacy). Through the continual hosting of numerous sporting events and continual investments in the sporting sector both nationally and internationally, KSA is trying to cement its position as *the* sporting nation of the world. In this sense, KSA is perceived to try to change the Western world's cognitive perception of KSA by continuously using *sports as a legitimation strategy* in an attempt to continuously gain *episodic exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic), thus making KSA an inevitable constituent in sports. Hence, by continuously investing in the international and national sporting sector, KSA is perceived to strive to become *taken-for-granted* as *the* sporting nation of the world by establishing the cognitive perception that KSA is an *inevitable* constituent within sports (Suchman, 1995). However, as Suchman (1995) notes taken-for-grantedness as a type of *legitimacy* generally lies beyond what is possible to achieve as *"market economies and pluralist political cultures rarely go so far as to assume that only one organization can wield a given technology or pursue a given program."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 583). Consequently, even though KSA attempts to become an inevitable constituent in the world of sports by continuously using *sports as a legitimation strategy* it is not certain that this will lead to KSA being taken for granted as *the* sporting nation of the world. However, even though taken-for-grantedness might be difficult for

KSA to achieve, it doesn't necessarily mean that KSA is unable to convert the potential *episodic exchange legitimacy* into *continual legitimacy*, nor does it mean that KSA is unable to gain *cognitive legitimacy*. Correspondingly, KSA's legitimation strategies for gaining *cognitive legitimacy* are further examined in the following section.

8.2.4 KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy to gain cognitive legitimacy

The final area in Thematic Network B that will be analyzed in the scope of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies is the organizing theme *"*Cognitive legitimacy*"* and its related basic theme, legitimation codes, excerpts, and sources.

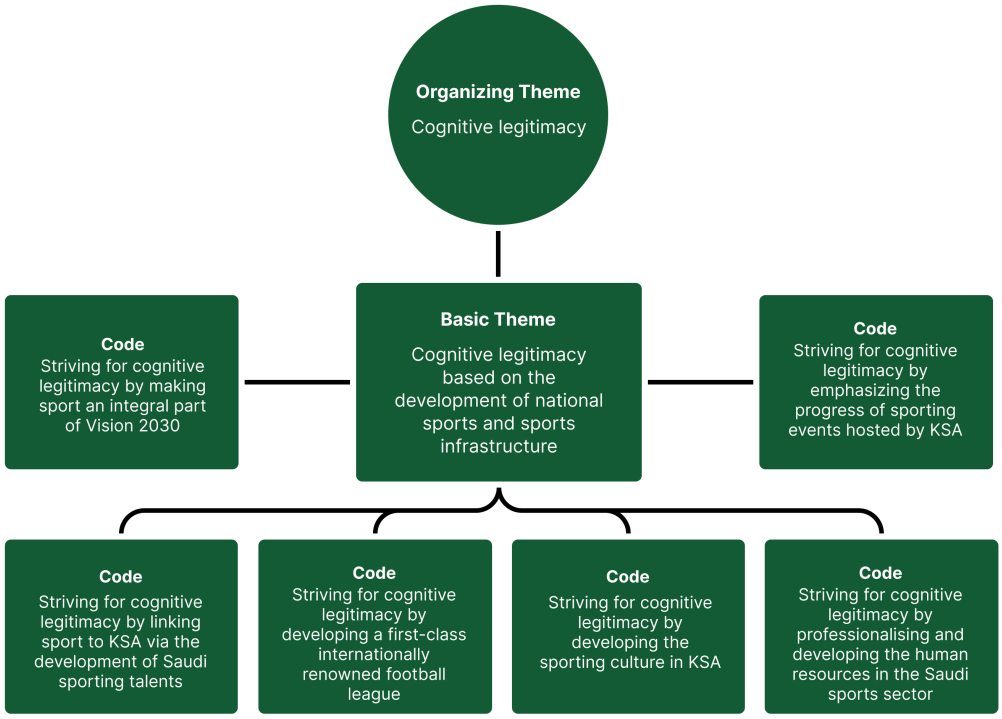

Figure 8.5: Cognitive legitimacy

In the previous section, it was examined how KSA tries to convert the perceived *episodic exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic) into continual *cognitive legitimacy* by striving to become taken for granted as an inevitable constituent in the sporting world. Although, as noted in the previous section, the status of being taken-for-granted is generally perceived to be almost impossible to attain (Suchman, 1995). However, as *cognitive legitimacy* is based on cognition, rather than a discursive evaluation, it is possible that KSA's continuous involvement in sporting events and investments in the sporting sector can provide KSA with a certain degree of *cognitive legitimacy.* This can happen if KSA, through its involvement in sports, is able to subtly change the Western world's unspoken orienting assumptions about KSA (Suchman, 1995). Nevertheless, there are also other legitimation strategies that can be utilized in the pursuit of *cognitive legitimacy*. One of the strategies

that can be utilized to gain *cognitive legitimacy* is *conforming to models* (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, organizations or nations aim to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by conforming to established models or standards within the preexisting institutional regime (Suchman, 1995). One of the legitimation strategies that can be utilized to conform to the established models or standards within the preexisting institutional regime is *mimetic isomorphism* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman & Eyre, 1992; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). The legitimation strategy of mimetic isomorphism is a strategy that entities in uncertain environments often pursue to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by mimicking the most prominent and secure entities in their fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Suchman & Eyre, 1992; Tolbert & Zucker, 1983). In this sense, an entity can indicate its clear intent to conform to established models and standards within a preexisting institutional regime by mimicking the most prominent and secure entities in its field. In the context of KSA, its hosting of sports events and investments in the sporting sector both nationally and internationally is perceived to reflect the country's use of mimetic isomorphism as a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy* - by mimicking its neighboring countries: *Bahrain, Qatar,* and the *United Arab Emirates (UAE)* (Nations Online Project, n.d.). Common for all of KSA, Bahrain, Qatar, and UAE is their substantial financial reliance on oil, thus they encounter the same challenge as highlighted for KSA in section 7 - lessening their financial dependency on oil through diversification (Social Watch, n.d.; World Bank, 2021; International Trade Administration; 2022). In this sense, all of the countries are facing the same uncertainty, making the occurrence of mimetic isomorphism more likely, as uncertainty is a powerful force that encourages imitation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

From the perspective of KSA and sports, KSA's engagement in mimetic processes leading to the mimetic isomorphism of its neighboring Gulf States is exemplified through KSA's collaboration with Formula 1. Qatar hosted Formula 1 for the first time in 2021 just like KSA, whereas Bahrain hosted its first Grand Prix in 2004 and UAE hosted its first Grand Prix in 2009 (Haldenby, 2023a; Haldenby, 2023b; Coco, 2022; F1, 2020). In this sense, the hosting of Formula 1 exemplifies KSA's use of mimetic isomorphism as a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by mimicking its neighboring countries' hosting of Formula 1. According to DiMaggio & Powell (1983) *"Organizations [in this case nations red.] tend to model themselves after similar organizations [in this case nations red.] in their field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful."* (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Based on this notion, KSA is considered to perceive its neighboring countries' engagement in Formula 1 as a successful strategy to handle the uncertainty that the nations' financial dependency on oil has established, by conforming to the established models and/or standards within the preexisting institutional regime of the Western world. Thus, KSA is perceived to also begin to host Formula 1 races in a strategic attempt to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by trying to conform to the established models or standards within the preexisting institutional regime of the sporting sector.

A related example of KSA's use of mimetic isomorphism as a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy* is KSA's takeover of Newcastle United. Just as with the hosting of Formula 1 races, KSA's neighboring Gulf States have also previously purchased European football clubs, just as KSA did with Newcastle United FC in 2021 (Sky Sports, 2021). In 2008 UAE purchased the English football club Manchester City, whereas Qatar purchased the French club Paris Saint Germain in 2012 (Kerr & Stafford, 2008; Doha News, 2012). In this sense, KSA's purchase of Newcastle United FC in 2021, just like the hosting of Formula 1, proves as an example of KSA's use of mimetic isomorphism as a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy,* by mimicking what KSA considers the most prominent and secure entities in its field - its neighboring countries. Furthermore, by taking a broader perspective of KSA's sporting initiatives as a collective strategy, it is possible to perceive how the larger sporting strategy employed by KSA is a strategic attempt to gain *cognitive legitimacy* through mimetic isomorphism by mimicking its neighboring countries - and especially Qatar.

As previously mentioned, KSA, like its neighbors, is uncertain about how to reduce its heavy reliance on oil by diversifying its economy. Faced with the same uncertainty, KSA's neighboring country Qatar, started investing in the sporting sector both nationally and internationally. Qatar aimed to become a global sports hub by developing its national sporting infrastructure and hosting sports events nationally and investing in European football and other sports internationally (Qatar Development Bank, 2021; Doha News, 2012). Similarly, KSA aims to become a global sports hub and diversify its economy through the sporting sector (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Consequently, KSA's diversification of its economy through the sporting sector is perceived to be a strategic attempt to pursue *cognitive legitimacy* through mimetic isomorphism by mimicking the most prominent and secure entities in KSA's field - its neighboring countries and especially Qatar (Suchman, 1995). Thus, it is evident that KSA is mimicking its neighboring countries, especially Qatar, as KSA presumably perceives Qatar to have been *successful* in conforming to the preexisting institutional regime of the Western world. This perception is presumably due to Qatar's progress within the sporting sector which culminated with its hosting of the FIFA World Cup 2022 - the greatest sporting event on the planet (FIFA, n.d.; McRae, 2022).

8.2.5 The ambiguity of legitimacy

The broader perspective of KSA's sporting strategy being a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy* through mimetic isomorphism also exemplifies the linkage and ambiguity between the different types of *legitimacy* and legitimation strategies. As previously touched upon in section 8.2.3, KSA individual sporting initiatives are perceived to be strategic attempts to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, primarily in the form of *exchange legitimacy*. However, as a collective strategy, they are perceived to be a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*, primarily in the form of taken-for-grantedness. Consequently, the strategic sporting initiatives possess a duality in relation to the concept of *legitimacy* in the sense that they solitarily represent a legitimation

strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy,* but collectively they represent a legitimation strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy*. Hence, the sporting initiatives can be perceived as different legitimation strategies for different legitimacies depending on whether the initiatives are analyzed solitarily or collectively. This emphasizes the ambiguity of Suchman's (1995) conceptual construction of the three legitimacies: *pragmatic, moral,* and *cognitive,* and the corresponding legitimation strategies to gain, maintain, or repair the legitimacies in the sense that the purpose of a strategic initiative from the perspective of *legitimacy* can be perceived in multiple ways, depending on whether the initiatives are perceived solitarily or as a part of a collective strategy. Additionally, corresponding with Suchman's (1995) definition notion of *legitimacy* being possessed objectively, but created subjectively, the effectiveness of the legitimation strategies employed is also considered to be somewhat ambiguous. This is given that the intended subjective creation of *legitimacy*, that a legitimation strategy tends to trigger, is dependent on whether the legitimation strategy's corresponding action is perceived to be desirable, proper, or appropriate within the subject's *socially constructed value system* (Suchman, 1995). Hence, as people possess different and potentially conflicting *socially constructed value systems*, people might perceive the same action differently. Consequently, the effectiveness of legitimation strategies is dependent on whether the legitimation strategy's corresponding action falls within the observer's *socially constructed value system* (Suchman, 1995). Thus, an action that one subject would perceive as legitimate, another might perceive as illegitimate if the two subjects *socially constructed value systems* are in conflict with one another. Furthermore, as mentioned in section 3.3, there are vast cultural differences between people around the world which results in people possessing different *socially constructed value systems*. Based on this notion, the effectiveness of KSA's attempts to gain *legitimacy* is also perceived to be ambiguous, as the effectiveness is dependent on whether KSA's engagement in sport is considered to be desirable, proper, or appropriate within the specific observers' *socially constructed value system* (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, when utilizing legitimation strategies to gain, maintain, or repair *legitimacy*, it is vital that the legitimation strategies' corresponding actions are perceived to be proper or desirable by the *socially constructed value system* of the subjects that one is targeting. In the context of this thesis, the effectiveness of KSA's legitimation strategies is dependent on whether KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is perceived to be proper and/or desirable based on the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. This will be further examined in section 9.

8.3 Sub-conclusion

Based on this analysis it is concluded that KSA is striving to gain *pragmatic*, *moral*, and *cognitive legitimacy* by using *sports as a legitimation strategy*. KSA's different initiatives within sports are individually concluded to be legitimation strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. KSA is concluded to attempt to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through the three following strategies; 1. responding to the respective audiences' need for sport by hosting sporting events or through investments in sporting entities, 2. utilizing international sporting entities and stars as character references that either directly or indirectly vouch for KSA's reliability, 3. building a

reputation as a sporting nation through continuous hosting of sports events and investments in the sporting sector. Thus, individually the strategic initiatives within sports are perceived as strategies to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. However, collectively these sporting initiatives are concluded to be a strategic attempt from KSA to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by attempting to become taken for granted as an inevitable constituent in sports. Furthermore, KSA is concluded to try to gain *moral legitimacy* by providing symbolic displays of how KSA is conforming to the Western world's principled ideals, by especially allowing and promoting Saudi Arabian women in sports. Finally, KSA is concluded to try to gain *cognitive legitimacy* through mimetic isomorphism, as KSA is concluded to mimic its neighboring countries' sporting strategies to overcome the same challenge that KSA's neighboring countries are facing - the financial uncertainty produced by the vast financial reliance on fossil fuels.

9. Analysis C - The effectiveness of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

Following the analysis of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy,* it is relevant to analyze how the Western world perceives KSA's *use of sports as a legitimation strategy* to examine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. To examine this, a Thematic Network Analysis of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is conducted. Subsequently, the thematic network is interpreted using Suchman's (1995) definitions of the different kinds of legitimacies to examine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* by comparing the results of this analysis to the results in section 8.

9.1 Thematic Network Analysis C - The Western world's perception of KSA's communication and initiatives

Thematic Network Analysis C is based on an interpretive analysis of 235 unique excerpts from 65 unique sources (Appendix 2). Based on Attride-Sterling's (2001) methodological approach, the different sources were dissected into excerpts and coded based on the implicit valence in the excerpts, to determine whether the excerpts were positively, neutrally, or negatively stemmed towards KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The aim of the coding process was to assess the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The analyzed excerpts were all related to sports initiatives from KSA, but the majority were related to *Formula 1 sponsorships and events*, *The purchase and governance of Newcastle United FC*, and *the establishment of LIV golf* (Appendix 2). Following the codification of the different excerpts, the codes were re-analyzed and re-interpreted in order to dissect any explicit or salient themes among the codes, thus enabling the development of the basic themes, by grouping the different codes based on their shared themes (Appendix 2). This led to the development of the following basic themes: *"Human Values", "Governmental ruling", "Sincerity & Honesty", "Soft Power", "KSA's engagement in sports",* and "*Western Governments' collaboration with KSA", "Protection of KSA"*, "*General perception of KSA", "Human values",* and *"KSA's engagement in sport"* (Appendix 2). After the classification of the basic themes, it was evident that there was a clear distinction between the basic themes in terms of them being either positive or negative (Appendix 2). Consequently, this polarization of the basic themes, being either positive or negative, led to the development of the organizing themes: *"Positive"* and *"Negative"* (Appendix 2). Based on these basic and organizing themes, the global theme of the analysis was defined as *"The Western world's perception of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy"* as this global theme clearly encapsulates the overarching theme of the analysis, which is how the Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Similar to Thematic Network Analyses A & B, the authors have added comments to the different codes and themes to be transparent about the thoughts laying the foundation for the establishment of thematic network C (Appendix 2). The development of the different basic themes, organizing themes, and global theme led to the development of thematic network C, which is visualized below:

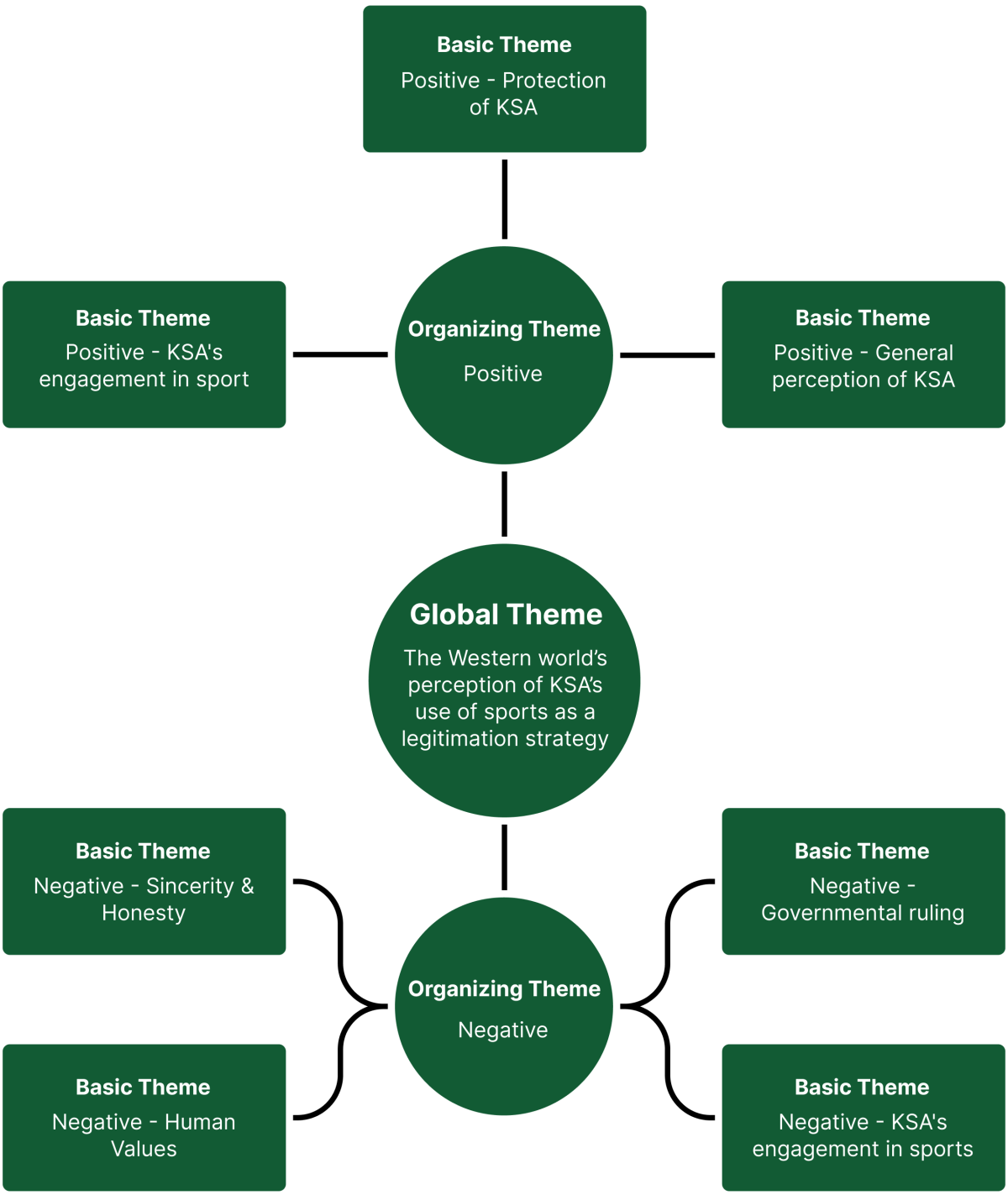

Figure 9.1: Thematic network C

9.2 Negative perceptions of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

Thematic Network Analysis C is divided into two sections based on the two organizing themes *Negative* and *Positive*. Initially, the basic themes that are connected to the organizing theme, *negative,* are analyzed to examine the Western world's negative perceptions of KSA's use *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The organizing theme *negative* is the most dominant organizing theme, as 177 of the 235 (75%) analyzed excerpts lie within this organizing theme. Additionally, 51 of the 65 (78%) sources contain *negative* excerpts. Hence, the interpreted perceptions within this organizing theme are considered to constitute the Western world's predominant perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, as the vast majority of the excerpts lie within this organizing theme.

9.2.1 Negative - Human Values

The basic theme, *Negative - human values*, was defined based on a predominant tendency among the codes that showed the Western media tend to have a negative focus on KSA's human values when covering KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 2). It was found that 27 of the 65 sources (42%) and 62 of the 235 (26%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme, indicating that it is a rather prominent perception.

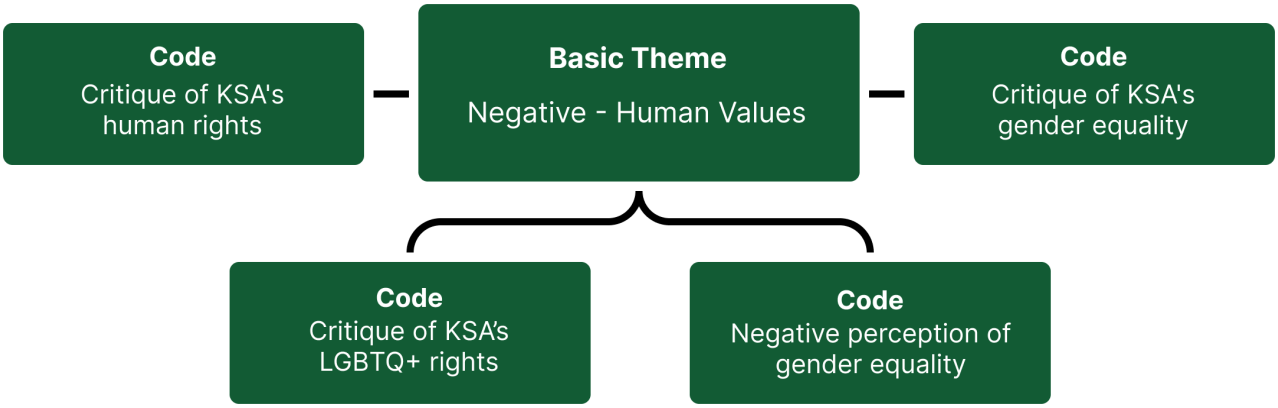

Figure 9.2: Negative – Human Values

One example is the news article by Quinn (2022) which criticizes KSA human values in a news article describing PIF's establishment of the LIV Golf tournament:

"*Prince Mohammed rules with, as Wood wrote, 'a reputation for ruthlessness' and a penchant for 'creating a climate of fear unprecedented in Saudi history.' Human rights advocates point to the jailing and alleged torture*

of activists, journalists, and dissidents. They point to years of bombings ravaging Yemen. They point to the nonexistence of LGBTQ+ rights. The list goes on. In March, Prince Mohammed's regime carried out a mass execution of 81 detainees." (Quinn, 2022).

A general tendency among the excerpts is the criticism of KSA for how it deals with basic human rights (Appendix 2). For instance, when discussing KSA's bid for the FIFA World Cup, the media, Politico, emphasizes how Greece faces a backslash over the joint bid with KSA since KSA has been "*condemned by human rights groups for a raft of abuses, including discrimination against women, brutal treatment of manual workers, and the torture — and even murder — of critics*" (Walker & Stamouli, 2022). Similarly, the British news media, The Independent, covers how the English racing driver, Lewis Hamilton, tells he is uncomfortable racing in KSA, as he highlights the country's "pretty terrifying" LGBTQ+ laws while emphasizing how he will wear a rainbow helmet on the circuit to put pressure on the regime (Martin-Pavitt, 2021).

Also, in contrast to the excerpts and codes related to the basic theme *"Moral legitimacy through gender equality",* in section 8.2, which indicated that KSA is attempting to improve gender equality by involving and promoting women in sports, the Western world does not perceive KSA's women rights to be satisfactory (Appendix 1 & 2). An example is the Western female football players, criticizing FIFA for rewarding KSA's state tourism authority sponsorship of the 2023 Women's World Cup (Worden, 2023). In this example, the focus was directed toward FIFA's poor human rights due diligence, since FIFA allows a KSA-owned organization to sponsor an international tournament for women, while KSA, according to the female football players, violates the rights of their Saudi Arabian women (Worden, 2023). Also, when analyzing the incentives for buying the football club, Newcastle United FC, Kay (2022), argues that, despite KSA's indication of actual progress in relation to human rights, KSA continues to neglect women's rights, among others, as he describes:

"*Despite social reforms in the past three years allowing women to get their own passports, travel abroad and live independently from the permission of a male guardian, their rights remain restricted. Women must obtain permission from a male guardian to get married, have a legal abortion or leave a domestic-abuse shelter or prison. In the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report last year, Saudi Arabia was ranked among the bottom 10 nations*" (Kay, 2022).

These examples from the excerpts used for the basic theme *"Negative - Human Values"* indicate the negative perception that the Western world has of KSA's women's and human rights. This perception stands in contrast to KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to show the nation's improvements in regard to these aspects by promoting women in sports and hosting conferences about ethics in sports among others (Appendix 1). As outlined in Section 8 these initiatives were perceived as legitimation strategies employed by KSA to gain moral

legitimacy through the use of symbolism by indicating the nation's attempt to conform to the Western world's moral ideals. However, as also mentioned in section 8.2.2, the use of symbolism as a strategy to gain moral *legitimacy* can also be a facade that covers KSA's immoral institutional structures and procedures, thus establishing a false appearance of conformity to Western moral ideals. Hence, based on the analysis of the excerpts linked to the basic theme "*Negative - Human Values"*, it is perceived to be the latter perception that the Western world has in regard to KSA's use of symbolism in terms of promoting women in sports and hosting conferences about ethics in sports. Consequently, the Western world appears to perceive KSA's use of symbolism as an attempt to establish a false appearance of conformity to Western moral ideals, as the Western media highlights that KSA is still engaging in human rights violations and treating women poorly, despite KSA's symbolic gestures through sports. Thus, by disregarding KSA's symbolic gestures, the Western world perceives the true moral identity of KSA or lack thereof. Consequently, this perceived clarity leads to the Western world not assigning any kind of *moral legitimacy* to KSA following its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, as the Western world perceives KSA's symbolic gestures of moral sincerity within sports as being nothing but a facade. Hence, referring back to section 8, and Suchman's (1995) notion of an entity being able to diverge dramatically from societal norms yet retain *legitimacy* because the divergence goes unnoticed, KSA's attempt to gain *moral legitimacy* through symbolism is perceived to be ineffective, as KSA continue to diverge dramatically from the Western world's societal norms, but fail to properly disguise the divergence.

9.2.2 Negative - Governmental ruling

The basic theme, *Negative - Governmental ruling*, was defined based on sources, which were perceived to either criticize KSA in general or criticize the governmental ruling of the country, despite the main objective of the sources being to cover KSA engagement in sporting activities (Appendix 2). It was found that 6 of the 65 sources (9%) and 8 of the 235 (3%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme (Appendix 2). This indicates that *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* is not the most prominent basic theme, but still occurs as a relevant theme to describe the overall attributes of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

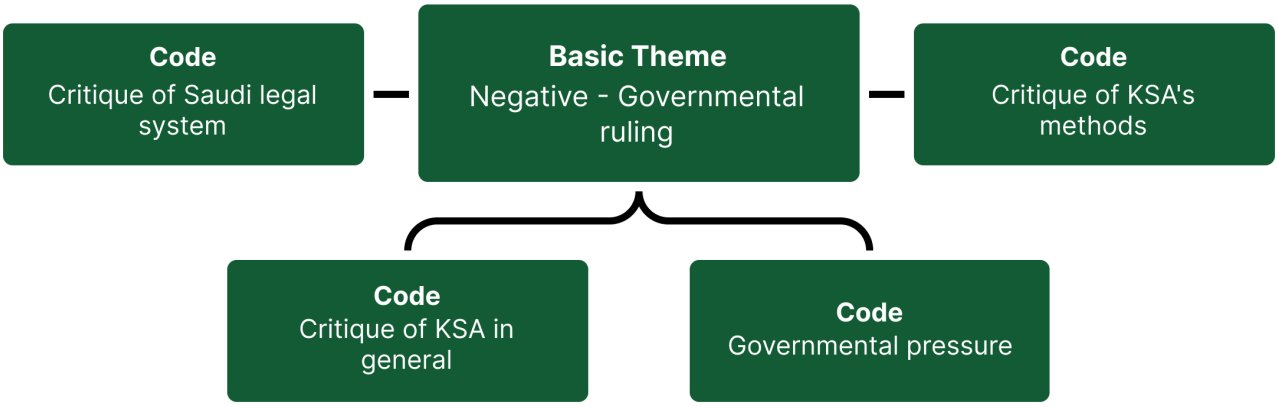

Figure 9.3: Negative – Govermental ruling

An example of how the Western media's perception has been negative towards the government of KSA is The Athletic's coverage of the government's methods to deal with homosexuals, which The Athletic studied following PIF's takeover of Newcastle United FC (Crafton, 2022). The Athletic describes how KSA's government treats homosexuality as a disease, which has to be cured, and how the government tortures homosexuals to reveal other homosexuals (Crafton, 2022). Another example of the negative perception towards the KSA government is the coverage of how it allegedly uses its wealth and natural resources to put pressure on foreign states (Crafton, 2023). When covering the English FA's approval of PIF to take over Newcastle United, The Athletic revealed how the approval might have occurred due to pressure from the UK government, as: "*It has previously been reported that MBS, the PIF's chairman, sent private phone messages to Johnson in which he warned there may be economic consequences for Britain if the Premier League resisted the takeover, and this spells out the masses of money potentially on the line for the UK economy*" (Crafton, 2023).

Thus, the analysis of the basic theme "*Negative - Governmental ruling"* further emphasizes the results from the analysis of the basic theme "*Negative - Human values"* in the sense that the Western media tend to have a critical perspective on KSA's sporting initiatives by using KSA engagement in sports as a way to highlight the nation's immoral actions in other areas. In this sense, the analysis of the basic theme "*Negative - Governmental ruling"* further emphasizes KSA's inability to conceal the nation's divergence from the Western world's societal ideals. Hence, the results of the analysis of the basic theme "*Negative - Governmental ruling"* further emphasize the lack of effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* from the Western world, as the Western media focuses on the nation's divergence from Western societal ideals, rather that KSA's development within sports. The analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* especially indicates that the Western world perceives KSA to lack *procedural legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995). The individual examples outlined in the analysis of both the basic theme *"Negative - Governmental*

ruling" and the basic theme *"Negative - Human values"* emphasize that the Western world perceives KSA to embrace socially unaccepted techniques and procedures in terms of how KSA treat members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and the population in general (Appendix 2). Consequently, the reports of KSA's divergence from what in the Western world is perceived to be socially accepted techniques and procedures indicate that the Western world is not assigning KSA *procedural legitimacy*, as the Western world perceives KSA to embrace socially unaccepted techniques and procedures in relation to human values.

Furthermore, the analysis also shows that the Western world perceives KSA to lack *structural legitimacy.* Suchman (1995) notes that *"[...] procedural and structural legitimacy blend together at the margins; however, whereas procedural legitimation focuses on discrete routines viewed in isolation [...], structural legitimation focuses on the general organizational features that arise when entire systems of activity recur consistently over time"* (Suchman, 1995, p. 581). Thus, whereas *procedural legitimacy* is assigned based on isolated procedures, *structural legitimacy* is assigned based on the larger general structural features of the entity. However, as previously mentioned, the sources and excerpts analyzed for both the basic theme of *"Negative - human values"* and the basic theme *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* indicate that KSA severely fails to embrace socially accepted techniques and procedures, in relation to how the nation treats members of the LGBTQ+ community, women, and the population in general. Hence, these reports individually indicate how KSA fails to embrace socially accepted techniques and procedures, however collectively they indicate that KSA's general system of activity and its structural characteristics is located outside what the Western world perceives as being a morally favored taxonomic category. Consequently, the Western media's coverage of KSA's divergence from the structural characteristics within the Western world's morally favored taxonomic category is perceived to lead to the Western world not assigning KSA any *structural legitimacy* based on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Similarly, Crafton's (2023) article about how MBS exerted pressure on the British government is perceived to emphasize how the Western world perceives KSA to lack *personal legitimacy*. Crafton (2023) reports how MBS threatened Boris Johnson with economic consequences if the Premier League resisted PIF's takeover of Newcastle United. The report exemplifies the Western media's negative portrayal of the Saudi ruler by highlighting how he uses techniques that are perceived to be unwarranted in the Western world to get his way. Thus, by portraying MBS as an illegitimate negotiator, the Western media establish a narrative where MBS is not assigned *personal legitimacy*, due to his lack of charisma. Hence, the analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - Governmental ruling"*, further indicates that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is ineffective in providing KSA *moral legitimacy*, and to some extent, it can be considered whether KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* might actually have led to the nation being assigned less *moral legitimacy* by the Western world due to the increased focus on the nation's illegitimate procedures, structures, and leader. This aspect will be further discussed in section 10.4.

9.2.3 Negative - Sincerity and Honesty

The basic theme, *"Negative - Sincerity and honesty"*, was developed based on multiple sources, which focused on how KSA and MBS are lacking reliability, accountability, and transparency (Appendix 2). What differentiates the basic theme *"Negative - Sincerity and honesty"* from *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* is that *"Negative - Sincerity and honesty"* focuses on how the Western world perceives KSA's transparency, whereas *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* focuses on how the Western world perceives KSA's general governmental actions and procedures. It was found that 8 of the 65 sources (12%) and 14 of the 235 (6%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme. This indicates that *"Negative - Sincerity and honesty"* is not the most prominent basic theme, but still occurs as a relevant theme to describe the overall attributes of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

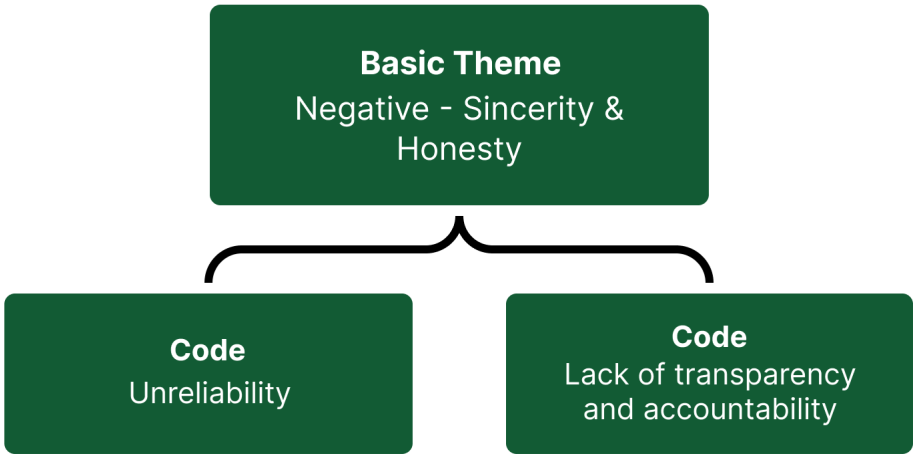

Figure 9.4: Negative – Sincerity & Honesty

Robson's (2023) coverage of the ownership structure of Newcastle United FC, which he covered following PIF's takeover of Newcastle United, exemplifies KSA's lack of transparency and accountability. As Robson (2023) outlines, KSA has been criticized for its lack of transparency regarding how PIF and the Saudi government are linked to one another. On the one hand, PIF has signed a legally binding promise to the Premier League that PIF is separated from the Saudi government (Robson, 2023). On the other hand, an American court document filed by lawyers for LIV Golf claims that PIF should be regarded as a foreign state (Robson, 2023). Hence, these contradictory statements by KSA negatively affect KSA's transparency and accountability, as KSA is providing contradictory statements about the linkage between the Saudi government and PIF. Furthermore, The Athletic criticizes the Saudi Minister of Tourism for lacking accountability, as he does not want to respond to the claimed double standards of welcoming overseas LGBT+ visitors to KSA while Saudi members of the LGBT+ community are being oppressed (Crafton, 2023). Also, the Financial Times described PIF as: "*opaque, a black box. Few know what's going on there, including sometimes other*

government ministries" (Kay, 2022). Thus, PIF is considered the quite opposite of a transparent investment fund by the Western world. Thus, the analysis of the basic theme, *"Negative - Sincerity and honesty"*, indicates that the Western world perceives KSA to lack reliability, accountability, and transparency.

From the perspective of *legitimacy*, the Western media's coverage of KSA's lack of reliability, accountability, and transparency further emphasizes the results from the analyses of previous the basic themes in terms of the Western world's perceiving KSA to lack *moral legitimacy*. Just as the results of the analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - Governmental ruling"* the analysis of this basic theme indicates that KSA lacks especially *structural legitimacy* due to the structural characteristics of the Saudi government and PIF, and the structural links between them, being untransparent. Transparency is perceived to be a structural characteristic that is located within the Western world's morally favored taxonomic categories. Thus, KSA's lack of transparency in terms of the linkage between the Saudi government and PIF further indicates KSA's inability to employ structural characteristics that locate within the Western world's morally favored taxonomic categories.

9.2.4 Negative - Soft Power

The basic theme, *"Negative - Soft power"*, was developed based on multiple sources, which perceived KSA as attempting to buy *legitimacy* and acquire soft power (Appendix 2). It was found that 42 of the 65 sources (65%) and 69 of the 235 (29%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme. The sources especially highlight the acquisition of Newcastle United, the establishment of LIV Golf, and KSA's hosting of Formula 1 as some of the most prominent attempts to buy *legitimacy* and acquire soft power (Appendix 2).

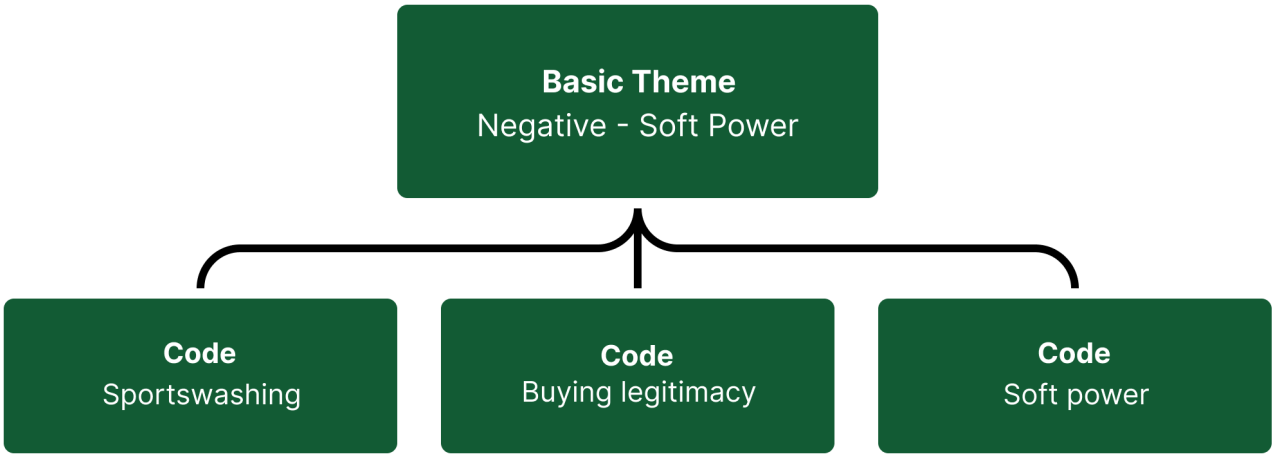

Figure 9.5: Negative – Soft Power

An example highlighting the above-mentioned perception comes from Lord Scriven (vice chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group in Great Britain). He wrote a public letter to the president of FIA (The governing

body of Formula 1 as well as other motorsports), Mohammed Ben Sulayem, to raise concerns over the Formula 1 races in Gulf states, that participates in the KSA-led war in Yemen. Later the letter was tweeted with the caption: "*Dear Ben Sulayem, Yesterday, 90 European parliamentarians sent you this letter, which hasn't yet been acknowledged. Please ensure the FIA & F1 heed these calls & put an urgent end to their sportswashing of ongoing abysmal violations in Bahrain & the Gulf*" (Paulscriven, 2022). Also, in relation to LIV Golf, some Western media claim that the LIV Golf tournament is a "*large-scale effort to sportswash Saudi Arabia's human rights record and improve its global image*" (Shepherd, 2022). Additionally, several news articles concerning the takeover of Newcastle United claim that the takeover is a *sportswashing* activity to gain soft power and attempt to limit the focus on Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, who MBS allegedly ordered to be murdered due to Khashoggi's negative media coverage of KSA's government (Worden, 2021). As Senior analyst, Elsborg (2023) puts it:

"The Saudi Arabian regime and crown prince Mohammed bin Salman has realised that sport provides a fantastic vehicle for political imagineering and for gaining political goodwill. Through sport, you can stay out of the normal political spotlight and bin Salman also uses sporting events to create new diplomatic relations, new trade agreements, attract tourist, and generally uses sport as a focal point for the position in the international society that the regime attempts to craft." (Elsborg, 2023).

Further emphasizing the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as being *sportswashing*, is the statistic by Commetric (2022). Through the analysis of 2,853 articles in leading English-language media outlets, between January 2019 and January 2022, Commetric (2022) found that KSA as a nation is mentioned in 21% of the analyzed English-language articles on sportswashing. This makes KSA the second most mentioned nation after China (38%) (Commetric, 2022).

Hence, the above-mentioned examples and the predominant tendency among the excerpts and codes used to develop the basic theme *"Negative - Soft power"* emphasize the negative perception that the Western world has of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to be *sportswashing*, as the Western world perceives KSA to use sports to conceal its general divergence from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. In this sense, the results from the analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - Soft power"* can be strongly linked to the results of the analysis of the basic theme *"Human values"*. The analysis of *"Human values"* outlined how the Western world perceived KSA's promotion of women in sports among others, as merely symbolic gestures to signal a false appearance of conformity to Western societal ideals. Similarly, the analysis of *"Negative - Soft power"* shows how the Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as *sportswashing*, in the sense that KSA's engagement in sports is perceived to be an attempt to conceal the nation's general divergence from the

Western world's *socially constructed value system*. Hence, the analysis of both basic themes indicates that the Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to be illegitimate, as the nation continues to diverge from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. Thus, what differentiates the two results from one another is that on the one hand, KSA's symbolic gestures of women in sports are perceived to be direct attempts to signal conformity to Western societal ideals of how women should be treated. On the other hand, KSA's general use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is perceived by the Western world as *sportswashing* as KSA is perceived to use sports to conceal its general divergence from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. In this sense, the results of both analyses can be perceived as being quite similar in the sense that they both indicate that the Western world perceives KSA to either directly or indirectly attempt to conceal the nation's divergence from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. Thus, the results of the analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - Soft power"* further emphasize the ineffectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as the Western world does not assign KSA *legitimacy* based on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

9.2.5 Negative - KSA's engagement in sports

The basic theme *"Negative - KSA's engagement in sports"* was developed based on multiple sources criticizing KSA for how it generally engages in and attempts to force its agendas through sports. Furthermore, the sources also criticize other entities for allowing KSA to use *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 2). Hence, the basic theme also emphasizes how KSA's engagement in sports can potentially influence the *legitimacy* of the entities that collaborate with KSA. It was found that 20 of the 65 sources (31%) and 24 of the 235 (10%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme. This indicates that *"Negative - Saudi Arabia's engagement in sports"* is a prominent theme that occurs throughout many of the sources and thus is an essential basic theme to describe the overall attributes of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

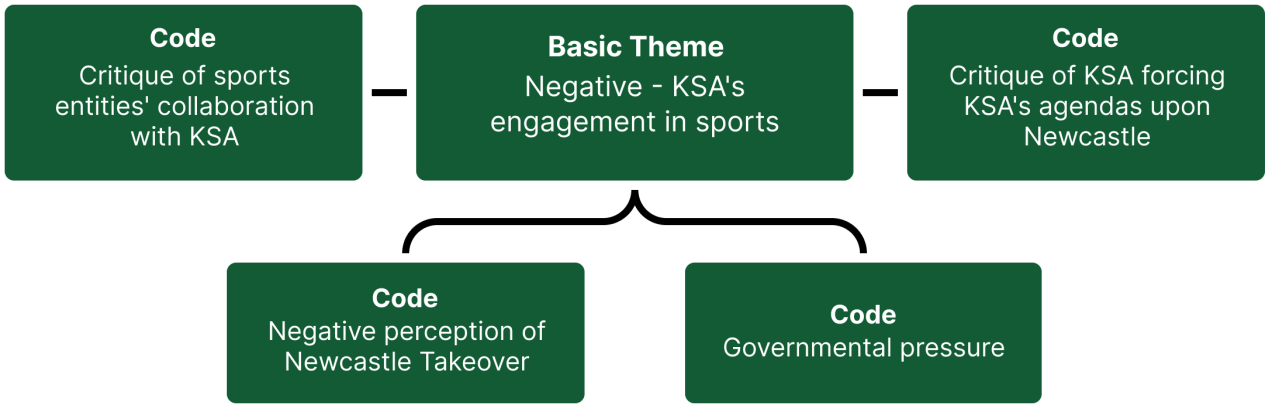

Figure 9.6: Negative – KSA's engagement in sports

There are several examples of different sports entities being criticized due to their collaboration with the Gulf states, with Formula 1 being one of the entities that receive the most criticism (Appendix 2). For instance, Reprieve Joint Executive Director, Maya Foa, expresses: "*For all the talk of 'positive values' and 'accelerating change', Formula One has never seriously engaged with human rights and the way the sport is used to whitewash abuses by some of the world's most repressive regimes,*" (Mngqosini, 2023). Similarly, The Independent and Lord Scriven accuse KSA of not complying with UN guidelines and criticize Formula 1 for not reacting accordingly by allowing KSA to host Formula 1 (Duncan, 2023). Another great concern is the claim that FIA and Formula 1 are *suppressing drivers' freedom of speech*", as FIA considers making it punishable for drivers to speak negatively about hosting countries (Jackson, 2023a).

In addition to Formula 1, there is also a focus on the Premier League and FA, and how they allowed PIF to buy Newcastle United FC, thus acknowledging that PIF fulfills the requirements of the Premier League's Owners' and Directors' test, despite being linked to a government with a flawed human rights record (Klein, 2021). Furthermore, FIFA has also been criticized for allowing KSA to host the Club World Cup as Amnesty International emphasizes that KSA has an *atrocious human rights record* (Amnesty International, 2023). Hence, the predominant criticism of the sporting entities collaborating with KSA is that the sporting entities fail to address the human rights issues that the Western world perceives KSA to possess and thus the sporting entities become silent accomplices in KSA's *sportswashing* attempts. Consequently, KSA's illegitimate actions are perceived to affect the *legitimacy* of sporting entities as the sporting entities' collaboration with KSA indicates that, in contrast to the Western world, the sporting entities do not perceive KSA as illegitimate. The sporting entities' collaboration with and legitimation of KSA will be further analyzed in 9.3.1.

There are also several examples of negative media coverage about KSA and their engagement with sporting entities and sports in general, as KSA allegedly uses sports to force its agendas (Appendix 2). As an example, KSA has been criticized by executives from Premier League clubs, for forcing KSA agendas upon Newcastle United, as Newcastle United's squad is being forced to train in KSA, participate in fan forums in KSA, and wear kits inspired by KSA's national team (Caulkin & Waugh, 2022).

Thus, the analysis of the basic theme *"Negative - KSA's engagement in sports"* shows how the Western world's perception of KSA's lack of *moral legitimacy* affects the sporting entities that collaborate with KSA. Hence, whereas the analyses of the other basic themes so far have directly indicated how the Western world perceives KSA as lacking *moral legitimacy*, the analysis of this basic theme shows indirectly how the Western world perceives KSA as lacking *moral legitimacy* by criticizing sporting entities for collaborating with KSA. Thus, entities that collaborate with what is considered to be illegitimate entities become criticized and to some

extent can be considered to lose some of their own *legitimacy* due to explicitly or implicitly legitimizing the illegitimate entity through collaboration. As such, the analysis shows a spillover effect of *legitimacy*, or in this case, the lack of *legitimacy*, as entities that collaborate with KSA also get criticized due to the collaboration. Hence, this analysis of the criticism of the sporting entities that collaborate with KSA indirectly indicates the ineffectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, as KSA is not assigned *legitimacy* by the Western world based on its collaboration with Western sporting entities. This further emphasizes the results of the analyses of the previous basic themes.

9.3 Positive perceptions of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

Following the analysis of the Western world's negative perceptions of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* the organizing theme *"Positive"* and its corresponding basic themes, codes, and excerpts are analyzed. The aim of the analysis is to examine the Western world's positive perceptions of KSA following its use of sports *as a legitimation strategy*. The organizing theme *"Positive"* is considered the least dominant organizing theme as it was found that 30 of the 65 sources (46%) and 66 of the 235 (28%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this organizing theme compared to the other organizing theme *"Negative"* which contained 177 of the 235 (75%) excerpts and 51 of the 65 (78%) sources. Hence, the perceptions interpreted in this part of the analysis are not considered to be the dominant perceptions in the Western world but do provide some insight into the alternative perceptions that exist.

9.3.1 Positive - KSA's engagement in sport

Despite multiple excerpts being negatively stemmed towards KSA's engagement in sports, as exemplified in section 9.2.5, there were also found multiple examples of excerpts that had a positive perception of KSA's engagement in sports. Therefore, the basic theme *"Positive - Saudi Arabia's engagement in sports"* was developed based on the different examples of excerpts which were positively stemmed towards KSA's engagement in sports (Appendix 2). Consequently, the basic theme *Positive - KSA's engagement in sports* was established as a contrast to the basic theme *Negative - KSA's engagement in sports*. It was found that 27 of the 65 sources (42%) and 46 of the 235 (20%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme (Appendix 2). This indicates that *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* is a prominent theme within the organizing theme *"Positive"*, as 27 of the 30 sources (90%) and 46 of the 66 excerpts (70%) used for the organizing themes are a part of this basic theme (Appendix 2).

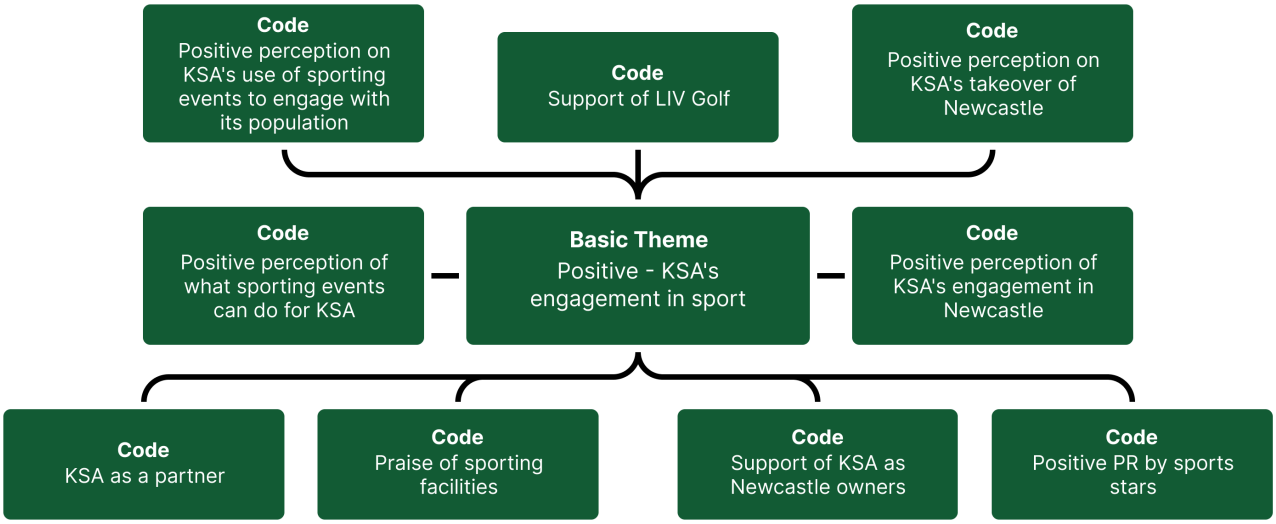

Figure 9.7: Positive – KSA's engagement in sport

One of the examples of the Western world's positive perception of KSA's engagement in sports comes from the football star, Cristiano Ronaldo, who currently plays for the KSA-based team, Al-Nassr. He says: *"it's [Saudi Pro League red.] a very competitive league that I'm positively surprised by, a very balanced league and good teams. I am sure that in the coming years the league will be ... the fourth, fifth, or sixth most competitive league in the world"* (Duerden, 2023c). Additionally, professional boxers, such as boxing legend Floyd Mayweather, acknowledge KSA as a great boxing nation, due to its ability to host some of the biggest tournaments in the world and its ability to attract international boxing fans to KSA to participate in the events (Hammond, 2023). Furthermore, following his main event fight against British boxer, Tommy Fury, the boxer and world-famous influencer, Jake Paul, expressed: "*We had more American superstars in the building here in Saudi than we do in the States. So this is becoming a hub, and just a really awesome place to put on events because the fans turn out*" (Al-Mayman, 2023). However, these positive perceptions are not limited to only athletes. Western executives in global sports corporations also express their positive perception of KSA and its sports facilities. For instance, Ross Brawn, Managing Director at Formula 1, and Stefano Domenicali, President, and CEO of Formula 1, argue that the different teams of Formula 1 are very excited about going to Riyadh to race due to the challenging circuit (Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, n.d.). As Ross Brawn expressed: "*The Circuit will be very challenging for the drivers. It has some great features, that they'll love, and of course, it's the fastest street circuit in the world*" (Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, n.d.). Also, despite Lewis Hamilton being negative towards KSA hosting Formula 1, he does acknowledge the circuit and believes it is "*pretty awesome"* (Mngqosini, 2023).

In addition, the excerpts that constitute the basic theme *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* show multiple examples of Western and Saudi media that cover positive perceptions from Western individuals towards

KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 2). One of the examples is, Graeme McDowell, a major winner, four-time Ryder Cup participant, and champion of the 2020 Saudi International, who, when confronted with the criticisms aimed at himself and other LIV players for participating in LIV Golf, argued how LIV Golf is a great opportunity for him and other golf players (Quinn, 2022). Also, former US president, Donald Trump, has publicly defended the LIV Golf Tour and even encouraged PGA Tour players to defer to LIV, as they should "*take the money now*", as Trump said when scheduling a LIV Golf tournament at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster New Jersey (Quinn, 2022).

Furthermore, in the context of PIF's takeover of Newcastle United, a lot of the Newcastle fans were delighted that PIF purchased the club, as they were aware of the financial power that the new owners would provide the club (Slater, 2022). As the announcement was made, several fans rushed to St. James Park (Newcastle United FC's stadium) wearing Saudi ghutra-inspired clothing to show their satisfaction with the new ownership (Slater, 2022). In the early stages of PIF's takeover of Newcastle United FC, it was also seen how the British government and other dignitaries of the UK were also positively stemmed towards PIF's takeover of Newcastle United and even supported the takeover (Crafton, 2023). The Department of International Trade (DIT) even intended to distribute a public relations offer, presumably to assist the takeover process by helping KSA to improve its image (Crafton, 2023). The Cabinet Office and Foreign Office also stated that "*HMG (Her Majesty's Government) is not neutral about UK's relationship with Saudi Arabia. It is a crucial and valuable relationship with an important partner, regionally and globally. The purchase of Newcastle United by KSA's (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) sovereign wealth fund would be a valuable boost to the relationship and signal of intent for further Saudi investment in the north east* " (Crafton, 2023). Also, The Foreign & Commonwealth Office indicated how they supported further Saudi investment in the UK, including Newcastle United (Crafton, 2023).

Thus, in contrast to results from the analysis of the basic themes connected to the organizing theme *"Negative"*, the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* indicates that there also exist some positive perceptions within the Western world of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. However, what is especially interesting to note is who it is that expresses these positive perceptions of KSA's engagement in sports. A predominant tendency within the excerpts that are connected to the basic theme *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* is that they are expressed by athletes, directors of sporting entities, celebrities, and/or fans that have a relation to KSA (Appendix 2). For example, Cristiano Ronaldo, who is contracted to the KSA-based club Al-Nassr praises the national Saudi Pro League, Donald Trump, whose golf course is hosting LIV Golf tournaments, is persuading PGA tour golfers to defer to LIV Golf, and Jake Paul, who has boxed in KSA, praises KSA sporting development (Duerden, 2023c; Quinn, 2022; Al-Mayman, 2023). These examples show

that the individuals who have a positive perception of KSA's engagement in sports are also the ones positively affected by it.

This is an interesting notion from the perspective of *legitimacy*. The results of section 9.2 showed that the Western world perceived to lack *moral legitimacy* and did not assign KSA any kind of *legitimacy* based on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. In contrast, the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* shows that the individuals that possess positive perceptions of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* assign KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* in the form of *exchange legitimacy*. *Exchange legitimacy* is defined as an observer or audience exchanging support for an entity's policy, based on that policy's expected value for a particular set of observers (Suchman, 1995). In this sense, the entity receives support from an observer based on the observer's expectation that its support of the entity will materialize into value for the observer. As outlined in section 8.2.3 KSA strives to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, in the form of *exchange legitimacy*, by exchanging engagement and investments in the sporting sector for support from the Western world. Consequently, the results from the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - KSA's engagement in sports"* show that KSA has, to some extent, been successful in its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, as different Western athletes, celebrities, fans, etc. support KSA's engagement in sports based on the expected value that they get in return by supporting KSA. Furthermore, Suchman (1995) argues that *exchange legitimacy* can shade into materialistic power-dependence relations. Similarly, many of these examples are perceived to stem from monetary power-dependence relations caused by the contractual relationship between KSA and the observer(s). Consequently, KSA essentially purchases *exchange legitimacy* from the previously mentioned individuals, which are perceived to implicitly or explicitly assign KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* based on the monetary reward they get from doing so.

An interesting example to draw upon when examining this notion of how KSA gains *exchange legitimacy* is the previously mentioned example of the Newcastle United FC fans that showed their praise of PIF's takeover of the club. Unlike the previously mentioned athletes, celebrities, and directors of sporting entities, these fans are not perceived to receive any direct monetary reward from KSA, as there is no contract between KSA and the Newcastle United FC fans. Instead, the Newcastle United FC fans are perceived to assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* based on the expected value of sporting success. In this sense, the Newcastle United FC fans are indirectly affected by the monetary power-dependence relationship between the club and PIF, as PIF's financial investments in the club are considered pivotal by the Newcastle United FC fans in terms of achieving sporting success. Hence, the Newcastle United FC fans are perceived to assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* based on the expectation that the support will result in sporting success like it has done previously for clubs that were purchased by Gulf nations such as Paris Saint Germain (Qatar) and Manchester City (UAE). Consequently, the results from the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - Saudi Arabia's engagement in sports"* indicate that

KSA to some extent has been able to effectively use *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* from Western individuals, who assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* based on the expectation of monetary rewards or sporting success.

9.3.2 Positive - General perception of KSA

The basic theme *"Positive - General perception of KSA"* is based on a minor tendency that showed that a limited number of excerpts were positively stemmed towards KSA in general (Appendix 2). It was found that 5 of the 65 sources (8%) and 6 of the 235 (3%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme (Appendix 2). Furthermore, 5 of the 30 sources (17%) and 6 of the 66 excerpts (8%) used for the organizing themes are a part of this basic theme, further indicating that this basic theme is less prominent but still relevant to include to fully grasp the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 2).

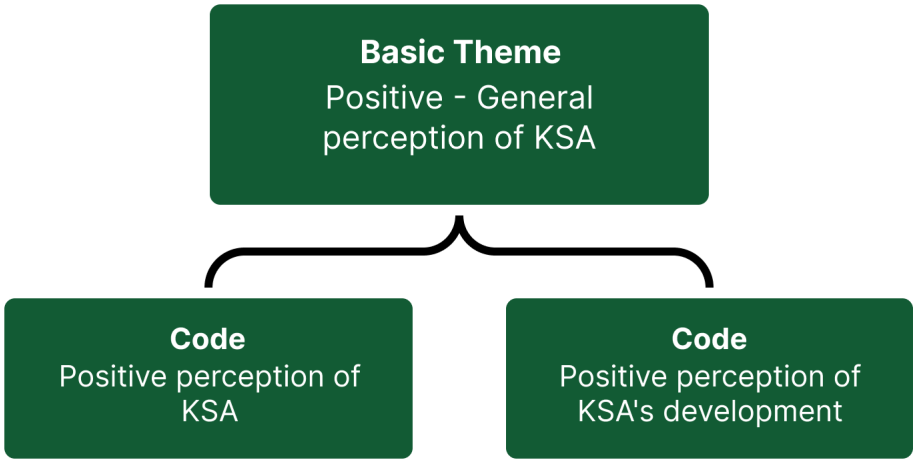

Figure 9.8: Positive – General perception of KSA

One of the examples of the generally positive perception of KSA is expressed by FIFA president, Gianni Infantino, who visited the new city in KSA, Neom, and said: "*What I experienced here is impressive, the world in its entirety should come to Saudi Arabia to watch it. The big improvements that underwent the past two years are unbelievable*" (gsaksa, 2021). Furthermore, British journalist Quinn (2022) expresses how KSA, under the leadership of MBS, has experienced significant modernization efforts. These efforts include meeting the entertainment demands of a predominantly young population, granting women the right to drive, and restraining the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (a quasi-police force that enforced Islamic doctrine with severe measures for many years) (Quinn, 2022). Also, British author and journalist, James Montague (2021), explains how KSA has actually opened to international influence and to its population, especially women, since the country reopened cinemas after being closed for decades, hosted concerts featuring Arabic and Western artists, and hosted international sports events. Furthermore, the

guardianship system was partially dismantled, allowing women to apply for passports, travel without male permission, work in more industries, and drive, as well as lifting the ban on women attending football matches (Montague, 2021).

Thus, in contrast to the results from section 9.2, the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - general perception of KSA"* indicates that there are some Western individuals that have a generally positive perception of the nation and its progress under MBS. Hence, these perceptions from Western individuals indicate that they to some extent assign *moral legitimacy* to KSA in the form of *structural legitimacy*. According to these individuals, KSA is beginning to generally embrace the Western world's structural characteristics by opening up its society and improving women's rights, indicating that KSA is starting to follow the Western world's societal ideals. However, it is pivotal to emphasize that this perception belongs to the minority of the analyzed excerpts and sources used for Thematic Network Analysis C (Appendix 2). Thus, this perception is not considered representative of the Western world's predominant perception but rather acts as a minor contrasting perception that indicates some degree of effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

9.3.3 Positive - Protection of KSA

The basic theme *"Positive - Protection of KSA"* was based on a theme in the excerpts that showed a minority of Western world individuals who explicitly defends KSA against the general criticism that KSA receives from the majority of the Western world (Appendix 2). It was found that 3 of the 65 sources (5%) and 6 of the 235 (3%) excerpts had a code that was grouped under this basic theme (Appendix 2). Furthermore, 3 of the 30 sources (10%) and 6 of the 66 excerpts (8%) used for the organizing theme *"Positive"* are a part of this basic theme. Thus, similarly to the basic theme *"Positive - General perception of KSA"*, the basic theme *"Positive - Protection of KSA"* is a less prominent basic theme, but still relevant to include to fully grasp the complexity of the Western world's perception of KSA use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* (Appendix 2).

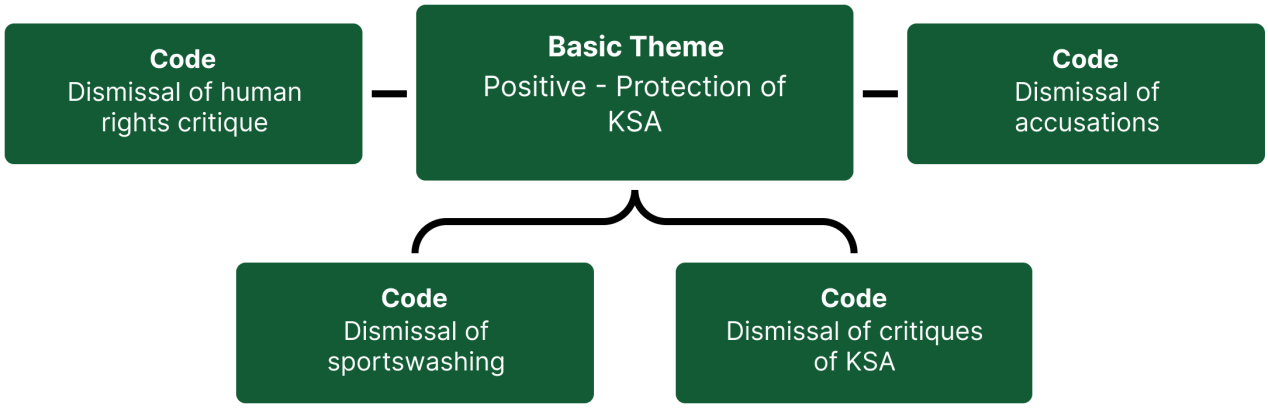

Figure 9.9: Positive – Protection of KSA

The protective statements from Western world individuals, predominantly concern the dismissal of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* being *sportswashing* as well as the claims of KSA being a renegade state (Appendix 2). As an example, a Formula 1 spokesperson explained: "*We take our responsibilities very seriously and have made our position on human rights and other issues clear to all our partners and host countries who commit to respect human rights in the way their events are hosted and delivered. We are proud of all our partnerships and look forward to building on those in the years ahead"* (Jackson, 2023b). Based on this claim, Formula 1 acknowledges KSA as a nation that follows Formula 1's expected guidelines regarding war and human rights, despite KSA being attacked during the hosting of its Formula 1 event in 2022 (Westbrook, 2022). Also, despite the results in section 9.2.4 showing that several Western media accuse LIV Golf of being a tool for *sportswashing*, some of the players who have transferred to the league, are defending LIV Golf against these accusations (Appendix 2). As an example, Graeme McDowell, a major winner, four-time Ryder Cup participant, and champion of the 2020 Saudi International expressed: "*When it comes to golf, there could very well be Saudis who love golf, play golf, follow golf, and who, as a point of pride, want to have their own golf league*" (Quinn, 2022). Thus, McDowell indirectly dismisses the establishment of LIV Golf as being a tool for *sportswashing*, by emphasizing that it might be to satisfy the potential golf fans of KSA. Also, when Amanda Stavely, who took part in the Newcastle United FC takeover, was asked whether the takeover could be considered *sportswashing* by British media, Stavely responded: "*Absolutely not. If that was the intention, we would have bought a major franchise in the US, not a football club currently sitting in the relegation zone in the Premier League. This is about business investment and doing something special with a fantastic football club with the best football fans in the world"* (Kay, 2021). Thus, Stavely is explicitly claiming that the purchase of Newcastle United FC has nothing to do with *sportswashing* and thus that the purchase has no hidden agenda in terms of legitimizing KSA. Similar to section 9.3.1, it is noted that these examples of Western individuals defending KSA are individuals who collaborate with KSA. Hence, these Western world individuals are perceived to be more positively stemmed towards KSA, due to their power-dependence relation with KSA, in comparison to the generally negative perception from the Western individuals outlined in section 9.2 who do not have a power-dependence relation with KSA. Consequently, there is a connection between the observers' relationship with KSA and the observers' perception of KSA, in the sense that Western observers that are connected to KSA tend to have a more positive perception of KSA in comparison to Western observers who have no connection to KSA. Hence the analysis of the basic theme *"Positive - Protection of KSA"* does not indicate any assignment of *legitimacy* to KSA as the excerpts mainly focus on the dismissal of the intent of KSA's actions, rather than appraising or criticizing KSA.

9.4 The effectiveness of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

In this section, the key results from section 8 and sections 9.2 and 9.3 are summarized and compared to examine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The comparison of the results from the two analyses will be divided into three sections based on the three overall types of *legitimacy*: *pragmatic, moral,* and *cognitive*. Thus, the aim of each of the three sections is to determine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic, moral,* and *cognitive legitimacy*, respectively.

9.4.1 Pragmatic legitimacy

In section 8 it was outlined that KSA's hosting of sports events and engagements in sports were separately perceived as attempts to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, whereas they collectively were perceived to be an attempt to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by trying to establish KSA as an inevitable constituent within the sports sector. The cognitive aspect of this strategy will be further discussed in section 9.4.3, whereas this section will focus on KSA's hosting of sports events and engagement in sports as individual attempts to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. As outlined in section 8, KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* through the general strategy of conforming to environments. Thus, KSA signals to the Western world that it aims to position itself within the Western world's preexisting institutional regime, thus signaling allegiance to the Western world's cultural order and established institutional logics by hosting sports events and engaging in sports.

One of KSA's strategies to signal conformity to the Western world's environment is the strategy of *responding to client needs* (Suchman, 1995). As outlined in section 8, KSA is perceived to try to respond to the Western world's need for sports by hosting sports events and engaging in sports. Furthermore, as outlined in section 8, by continuously hosting various sports events and engaging in different sporting activities, KSA attempts to *build a reputation* within sports, which is another strategy to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* (Suchman, 1995). As such, KSA aims to be able to trade upon its generally strong reputation within sports, when engaging in new kinds of sports, thus making use of dispositional appeals to legitimize KSA as a constituent within sports. Lastly, as outlined in section 8, KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by making use of *character references*. KSA utilizes *character references* by having international athletes and sporting entities either directly or indirectly vouch for KSA's inherent trustworthiness. Consequently, these three sub-strategies within the general strategy *conforming to environments* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, indicate how KSA strategically uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. However, the effectiveness of these strategies is dependent on the perceptions of the target audience, which in this thesis is the Western world.

The results of sections 9.2 and 9.3 show that some Western world individuals assign KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* in the form of *exchange legitimacy*, as they support KSA based on the value that they expect to receive from

KSA as a result of this support. An interesting notion is that the observers from the Western world that assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* are predominantly the individuals who have some sort of direct relationship with KSA, primarily in the form of a monetary power-dependence relation. Hence, it is the same Western individuals and sporting entities that KSA relies on for *character references* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*, that also constitutes the majority of the observers from the Western world that assigns KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* in the form of *exchange legitimacy*. Thus, this clearly indicates the nature of how *exchange legitimacy* is assigned to entities, and in this case, KSA, as the observers that assign KSA *exchange legitimacy*, are the ones that directly benefit from supporting KSA. Thus, these observers are not perceived to assign KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* due to KSA effectively employing the previously mentioned strategies but rather due to their relationship with KSA. In this sense, these observers presumably would not receive any value from KSA if they publicly declared KSA to be illegitimate. Furthermore, if the observers acknowledged that KSA is illegitimate, but continued to collaborate with KSA, then the observers are expected to be perceived as illegitimate as well, as they collaborate with an illegitimate partner. A degree of this spillover effect was outlined in section 9.2.5, where sporting entities were criticized for collaborating with what the authors of the sources considered an illegitimate entity, KSA.

Furthermore, as a part of the interpretation of whether KSA has gained *pragmatic legitimacy*, it was found that a part of the Newcastle United FC fanbase assigns KSA *exchange legitimacy*. As mentioned in section 9.3.1, these Newcastle United FC fans assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* not based on the direct monetary power-dependence relationship between them and KSA, but rather due to the direct monetary power-dependence relationship between the club and KSA, which indirectly affects the fans. In this sense, the fans assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* based on the perception that KSA's financial support of the club will lead to the sporting success that the fans crave. In other words, the fans support KSA based on the expectation that KSA is indirectly capable of responding to the fans' need for sporting success through KSA's financial support of the club, hence making the club a mediator in the relationship between KSA and the fans. The Newcastle United FC fans who support KSA, indicate that KSA's utilization of *sports as a legitimation strategy* by *responding to client's needs* has been effective to gain *exchange legitimacy* from these fans. However, it also emphasizes that it is the observers from the Western world that either engage in a direct monetary power-dependence relationship with KSA (e.g., international sporting entities) or benefit from these relationships (e.g., Newcastle United FC fans), that assigns KSA *pragmatic legitimacy.*

However, it is pivotal to emphasize that these indications of the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* stems from the minority of the excerpts and sources in the analysis. In contrast, the majority of the excerpts analyzed show no implicit or explicit indications of the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*. The lack of indications is presumably due to

pragmatic legitimacy resting on the self-interested calculations of an entity's most immediate audiences and often involves direct exchanges between the entity and the audience (Suchman, 1995, p. 578). Consequently, the majority of the observers from the Western world analyzed are not involved in direct exchanges with KSA. Thus, assigning KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* will provide them little to no benefit. Furthermore, as mentioned in section 8.2.3 KSA attempts to gain pragmatic legitimacy through dispositional appeals established by the Western partners. However, as Suchman (1995) noted, the sole dependence on dispositional appeals is rarely an effective strategy for gaining *pragmatic legitimacy,* as the strategy needs to be supported by actual proof that the entity is able to meet the substantiated needs of the audience (Suchman, 1995). Hence, as the Western world predominantly does not assign KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* as a result of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, it indicates that KSA is unable to meet the Western world's needs, making the dispositional appeals hollow attempts to gain *pragmatic legitimacy*.

9.4.2 Moral legitimacy

As outlined in section 8.2.2, KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* in an attempt to gain *moral legitimacy* by conforming to the Western world's principled moral ideals, especially through the strategy of *symbolism* (Suchman, 1995). The most prominent example of this strategy is KSA's promotion of Saudi Arabian women in sports, where KSA tries to symbolize that it is conforming to the Western world's principled moral ideals of how women should be treated.

However, according to the results in sections 9.2 and 9.3, the Western world generally does not assign KSA *moral legitimacy* following KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy.* This is due to the Western world perceiving KSA's use of *symbolism* as an attempt to create a deceptive image of conformity to Western moral standards as Western media emphasizes that KSA is committing human rights violations and mistreating women. Consequently, despite Suchman's (1995) notion that an entity *"[...] may diverge dramatically from societal norms yet retain legitimacy because the divergence goes unnoticed"* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), KSA is not considered to gain *moral legitimacy*, as KSA's divergences from the Western world's principled moral ideals, do not go unnoticed. Hence, the Western world instead perceives KSA's use of *symbolism* via sports as being a facade covering KSA's general immoral institutional structures and procedures, thus establishing a false appearance of conformity to Western moral ideals. Thus, KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* in the form of *symbolism* to gain *moral legitimacy* is ineffective.

Similarly, the results from sections 9.2 and 9.3 show that the Western world perceives KSA's general engagement in sports as an attempt to conceal KSA's divergence from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*, or in other words, *sportswashing*. Consequently, this leads to the perception from the Western world that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is no more than a facade to conceal

KSA's general divergence from the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. Thus, this further emphasizes the ineffectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *moral legitimacy*. Consequently, this leads to the discussion of whether KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* has actually led to KSA losing *legitimacy*, as the strategy has brought more attention to KSA and its illegitimate procedures and structures. This perspective will be further discussed in section 10.4.

9.4.3 Cognitive legitimacy

As outlined in section 8.2.3, KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by continuously hosting sports events and investing in the sporting sector. By doing so, KSA attempts to convert the expected *episodic exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic), that KSA aims to gain through these initiatives individually, into a *continual cognitive legitimacy* by becoming taken for granted as an inevitable constituent in sports. Furthermore, as outlined in section 8.2.4, KSA also attempts to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by conforming to established models or standards within the preexisting institutional regime through *mimetic isomorphism,* by mimicking its neighboring states' use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

There are no clear indications in the results of section 9 that indicate that the Western world assigns KSA any kind of *cognitive legitimacy* following KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. However, the Western world's lack of assignment of *pragmatic* and *moral legitimacy* to KSA based on its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* indicates that the Western world does not assign KSA a taken-for-granted status as an inevitable constituent within the world of sports. Instead, KSA's continuous use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* leads to the Western world's cognitive perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* being *sportswashing*. Furthermore, KSA is unable to convert the *episodic exchange legitimac*y (pragmatic), that it aimed to gain through its use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, into *continual cognitive legitimacy*, as only a small minority of the Western world is perceived to accredit KSA exchange legitimacy. Hence, KSA is unable to convert *episodic exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic) into *continual cognitive legitimacy* as there are no indications that the majority of the Western world assigns KSA *exchange legitimacy* in the first place. Thus, there is virtually no *exchange legitimacy* to be converted into *continual cognitive legitimacy*.

Furthermore, there are no indications that the Western world assigns KSA *cognitive legitimacy* as a result of KSA's use of *mimetic isomorphism*. By mimicking its neighboring states' use of *sports as a legitimation strategy,* KSA tries to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by conforming to its neighboring countries' established models or standards. However, KSA fails to note whether its neighboring countries' established models or standards are aligned with the Western world's models and standards. In this sense, KSA might be successful in mimicking its neighboring countries' established models or standards. However, if these models and standards are perceived as being in nonconformity to the Western world's established models and standards, then the

Western world will not assign KSA any *cognitive legitimacy*. By mimicking its neighboring countries' use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, KSA signals conformity to what the Western world perceives as an illegitimate model of trying to use sports to conceal a nation's illegitimate actions or in other words *sportswashing*. This emphasizes the ineffectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *cognitive legitimacy* through *mimetic isomorphism*.

9.5 Subconclusion

In conclusion, the results of this analysis show that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* is predominantly ineffective. The Western world perceives KSA's use of *symbolism* to signal a false appearance of conformity to the Western world's moral ideals. This perception is established due to the Western media's continuous reporting of how Saudi Arabian women are oppressed despite KSA promoting Saudi women's progress in sports. Thus, it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is ineffective in gaining *moral legitimacy* as the Western world predominantly perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as *sportswashing*.

Still, it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to some extent is effective to gain *exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic). However, the *exchange legitimacy* is solely accredited to KSA from the observers that have a relation to KSA (e.g., International athletes and sporting entities) based on a monetary power-dependence relationship between them and KSA, and/or observers that indirectly benefit from these monetary power-dependence relationships (e.g., Newcastle United FC fans). Hence, it is concluded that the only kind of *legitimacy* that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is effective in gaining is the one it directly or indirectly "purchases" from Western observers.

Furthermore, it is concluded that there are predominantly no indications that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is effective in gaining *pragmatic* or *cognitive legitimacy*. The results of the analysis show no indications that the Western world generally assigns KSA's *pragmatic legitimacy* as the majority of the Western world are not involved in direct exchanges with KSA. As *pragmatic legitimacy* rests on the self-interested calculations of an entity's most immediate audiences and often involves direct exchanges between the entity and the audience, assigning KSA *pragmatic legitimacy* will provide them little to no benefit. Based on this conclusion, it is concluded that KSA is unable to convert episodic *pragmatic legitimacy* into continual *cognitive legitimacy* using *sports as a legitimation strategy*, as there generally is no *pragmatic legitimacy* to be converted. Lastly, it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* through *mimetic isomorphism* is ineffective to gain *cognitive legitimacy*, as the Western world perceives KSA to signal conformity to the illegitimate model of trying to use sports to conceal a nation's illegitimate actions by using

this strategy. Thus, it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* is predominantly ineffective.

10. Discussion

In the previous section, KSA's incentives to gain *legitimacy*, how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* in an attempt to gain *legitimacy*, and finally the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* was analyzed. Following these analyses, the most prominent analytical-, empirical-, theoretical-, ethical- and intellectual implications, reflections, and considerations of the thesis will be discussed.

10.1 Methodological, empirical, and theoretical considerations, reflections, and implications

10.1.1 The interpretive approach and reproducibility

Firstly, the methodological approach of the thesis and its corresponding implications are discussed. As outlined in section 4.1, this thesis is based on an interpretive research philosophy, resulting in the analyses and corresponding results being influenced by the authors' interpretations. Hence, the results of the thesis are not considered to be objective universal results, but rather subjective results, based on interpretations of KSA's strategic initiatives within sports and the Western world's perception of these. As such the interpretive research philosophy is considered to have a negative effect on the thesis' reproducibility. This is due to other researchers potentially interpreting the empirical data used for the thesis in another way and getting other results if they have a different historical or social perspective. The interpretive research philosophy and its implications clearly come to light in the thesis' Thematic Network Analyses, as the analyses are based on the authors' selection of relevant sources and excerpts. Further, the interpretation of these sources and excerpts is based on the authors' historical and social perspectives. Hence, what is interpreted as relevant sources and excerpts to include, are subjective to the authors and might differ from what other authors would interpret as relevant to include. Furthermore, the interpretation of the sources and excerpts, exemplified by the formulation of codes and themes, is a subjective interpretation made by the authors, meaning that other authors potentially interpret the sources in another way and formulate different codes and themes. Hence, the interpretive research philosophy used for the Thematic Network Analyses exemplifies why the thesis is considered to have a low degree of reproducibility. However, arguably any study conducted through an interpretive research philosophy will have a low degree of reproducibility as the research is affected by the subjectivity of the researchers.

10.1.2 Empirical implications

An empirical implication is that the majority of the empirical data used to analyze the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* originates from sources originating from Denmark, The United Kingdom, or The United States of America. Hence, it is primarily the perception of Denmark, The United Kingdom, and The United of America that is expressed in section 9, when analyzing the effectiveness of KSA's

use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Using sources from all parts of what is defined as the Western world (section 6.4), would provide a more comprehensive and perhaps more nuanced overview of the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. However, when interpreting sources, it is pivotal that the interpreters are able to fully understand the language of the sources. Consequently, a limitation connected to the origin of the media used for all the different analyses is the authors' limitation in terms of not being able to interpret sources in languages that they do not understand. Hence, the authors' linguistic limitations limited them to only being able to interpret sources in either Danish or English. On the one hand, this limitation could have been overcome by translating sources in other languages into Danish/English. On the other hand, by translating sources there is a risk that elements get lost in translations, thus leading to a misinterpretation of the source. Thus, the sources used in the thesis were limited to sources in Danish or English.

This implication raises the question of whether the findings on the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, based primarily on sources from Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, can be considered representative of the entire Western world. On the one hand, the authors have, throughout the thesis, highlighted and emphasized that the perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is dependent on the individual observer's *socially constructed value system* and thus might differ depending on who the observer is. Consequently, it is also considered challenging to generalize the perceptions of sources that primarily originate from Denmark, The United States of America, and The United Kingdom to be representative of the larger perception from the Western world of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. On the other hand, The United Kingdom and The United States of America are considered to be two of the most dominant constituents within the Western world in terms of shaping the general *socially constructed value system* that the Western world generally follows. Furthermore, Huntington (1996), whose definition of Western Civilization has been used to define what is considered *the Western world* in this thesis (see section 6.4), also argues that The United States and The United Kingdom are considered to be the dominant countries within Western Civilization. Thus, on the one hand, it is not possible to generalize how the Western world collectively perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* based primarily on sources from Denmark, The United States of America, and The United Kingdom, as one would neglect the notion of cultural difference. On the other hand, The United States of America and The United Kingdom are considered to be two of the most dominant constituents of the Western world. Therefore, the general perception from the sources that originate from these countries is considered to provide an indication of how the Western world perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Consequently, future research is suggested to further examine other parts of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to grasp a more nuanced understanding of whether the perception found in this thesis is aligned with these. Thus, future research can help examine whether the results of this thesis are actually generalizable to the Western world by examining other parts of the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

10.1.3 Legitimation strategies in an (inter)national context

A theoretical consideration that is essential to reflect upon and discuss is whether Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies are applicable to nations, as the theoretical framework originally was designed for organizations. On the one hand, there are some implications of transcending the theoretical framework from the organizational level to an (inter)national level, in terms of whether a nation can be ascribed *legitimacy* the same way as an organization is ascribed *legitimacy*. On the other hand, Suchman (1995) mentions nation-states as an example when presenting his Typology of Legitimacy indicating that *legitimacy* as a concept is applicable to nations. Furthermore, just as with organizations, nations also engage in transactions with other nations or organizations, and thus just like organizations, nations need to be perceived as legitimate to ensure that audiences want to engage in transactional relations with them. Hence, Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies are considered to be applicable to an (inter)national level.

Another point of discussion, regarding this thesis' analysis of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy,* is the conclusion that KSA uses s*ports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* rather than maintain or repair *legitimacy*. This conclusion in section 8 was based on the conformity between Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to gain *legitimacy* and how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*. In contrast, there was no conformity between Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to maintain or repair *legitimacy* and how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

However, Suchman (1995) notes that *"In many ways, the task of repairing legitimacy resembles the task of gaining legitimacy. Unlike legitimacy creation, however, legitimacy repair generally represents a reactive response to an unforeseen crisis of meaning."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 597). In this sense, the purpose of repairing and gaining legitimacy is quite similar to one another but differs in the sense that the strategies to repair *legitimacy* are commonly utilized as a reactive response to a *legitimacy* crisis, rather than a proactive action to obtain *legitimacy*. Thus, the similarities between the task of gaining and repairing *legitimacy* indicate that it is possible to interpret KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as a strategy to repair *legitimacy* if the strategy is perceived as a reactive response to a *legitimacy* crisis. However, as previously mentioned, the authors found no resemblance between Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to repair *legitimacy* and KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Furthermore, Suchman (1995) emphasizes that legitimation strategies to gain *legitimacy* are commonly employed when entities embark on a new line of activity to win acceptance either for the propriety of the activity in general or for their own validity as practitioners (Suchman, 1995, p. 588). Similarly, as the results of section 7 show, KSA is embarking on new lines of activities, as KSA attempts to diversify its economy to become less financially reliant on fossil fuels such as oil. Thus, this further emphasizes why KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is interpreted as a strategy to gain *legitimacy*.

Staying within the concept of *legitimacy*, the results of section 9 indicate that KSA potentially faces a *legitimacy* crisis following the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* being *sportswashing*. Hence, future research is encouraged to examine what kind of legitimation strategies KSA can/should utilize to overcome this potential *legitimacy* crisis.

10.1.4 Interpretive research philosophy and legitimacy & sportswashing

Furthermore, in the context of this thesis, it is interesting to discuss the interpretive research philosophy and its implications in relation to two of the most prominent concepts analyzed and discussed in this thesis, *legitimacy,* and *sportswashing*. According to Suchman (1995) *legitimacy* is assigned to an entity based on if the observer(s) consider *"the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions."* (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Consequently, similarly to how interpretivism is based on the assumption that reality is subjective, multiple, and socially constructed, the perception of something being legitimate is based on an observer's *socially constructed value system*. Hence, both concepts are considered to be socially constructed. Thus, while the interpretive research philosophy may hinder the reproducibility of the thesis' results, it is considered to be an ideal research approach to examine the concept of *legitimacy*. Consequently, when studying the concept of *legitimacy*, it is not considered to be possible to find universal results that are generally applicable, as what is considered to be legitimate is dependent on the individual observer's *socially constructed value system*.

Similarly, given the definition of *sportswashing* developed in this thesis, the notion of whether actions are considered to be *sportswashing* or not is similar to the notion of whether actions are perceived to be legitimate or not. In this sense, the determining factor is the observer's *socially constructed value system*. Hence, on the one hand, an observer might consider a nation's use of *sport as a legitimation strategy* to be *sportswashing*, due to the perception that the nation is attempting to conceal its divergence from the observer's *socially constructed value system*. On the other hand, another observer might not consider this strategy to be *sportswashing* as it perceives the nation's use of *sport as a legitimation strategy* as being a genuine attempt to conform to the observer's *socially constructed value system*. Consequently, both *legitimacy* and *sportswashing* are considered to be socially constructed concepts that are dependent on the subjective perception of the individual observer. Hence, when studying these two concepts, it is not possible to establish universal results that are generally applicable, as what is considered legitimate and/or *sportswashing,* is perceived subjectively based on an observer's *socially constructed value system*. Thus, on the one hand, the interpretive research philosophy might hinder the reproducibility and the ability to establish universal results that are generally applicable due to its interpretive nature and perception of reality being subjective, multiple, and socially constructed. On the other hand, the approach is considered ideal for studying the concepts of *legitimacy* and *sportswashing* as these concepts are based on a subjective perception from an observer based on the observer's

socially constructed value system. Consequently, the perceptions of actions being *sportswashing* or legitimate become subjective, multiple, and socially constructed, just like reality is perceived to be according to interpretivism. Thus, the interpretive approach is considered obvious to study the phenomena, *legitimacy,* and *sportswashing*.

10.1.5 Academic rigor and transparency

Following the discussion of the implications of the interpretive research philosophy in terms of the low degree of reproducibility, it is equally important to discuss how the authors have aimed to ensure a high degree of academic rigor when employing an interpretive methodological approach. The authors have tried to ensure a high degree of academic rigor by providing a high degree of transparency throughout the thesis. This was ensured by being transparent about the decisions made both methodologically, theoretically, empirically, and analytically, as well as the background for these decisions. The high degree of transparency is exemplified in the Thematic Network Analyses where memos/notes have been added to excerpts to ensure transparency of how and why the authors have interpreted and coded the excerpt the way they have (Appendix 1 & 2). Similarly, the authors have added comments in the Thematic Network Analyses when establishing the analyses' basic, organizing, and global themes to again ensure a high degree of transparency of the authors' considerations and interpretations that provide the foundation for the establishment of the themes (Appendix 1 & 2). Furthermore, throughout section 9 the authors have been transparent about how the number of sources and excerpts are linked to the different basic themes. This was done to indicate how prominent the different basic themes are.

However, upon the completion of the Thematic Network Analyses, the authors noted that it would have been possible to further increase the transparency of the analyses by showing the search queries used to find the sources used for the analyses. By doing so, the authors would have increased the transparency regarding any potential bias in the search for the sources used for the analyses. However, as this appeared as a retrospective thought following the completion of the analyses, it was not possible to recall and collect the search queries used to locate the sources, and thus not possible to outline the search queries. Consequently, the exclusion of the search queries to some extent limits the transparency of the thesis. However, despite the absence of the search queries, the authors still perceive the thesis to possess a high degree of transparency due to the authors' general transparency about the analytical, methodological, and theoretical choices made throughout the thesis.

Continuing in this vein, given the authors' acknowledgment of the differences in people's *socially constructed value systems* related to people's perceptions of nations' use of sports, it is pivotal to discuss the implications caused by the authors' Western background. One of the main implications is that the authors are perceived to generally follow the same *socially constructed value system* as the Western world, and thus their interpretations

are most likely biased by their cultural background. As outlined in section 4.7, the authors have tried to accommodate the implication of researcher bias by trying to provide a high degree of transparency throughout the thesis in relation to the choices made, and the corresponding thoughts behind those choices. However, as the thesis is based on an interpretive research philosophy the subjectivity of authors is expected to affect the analytical interpretations and results of the analyses. Consequently, transparency is considered to be the best method to accommodate this implication.

In addition to the discussion of the thesis' methodological approach, it is important to critically reflect on the thesis' analysis of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. This critical reflection is linked to the authors' interpretation of KSA's engagement in sports in the thesis being a legitimation strategy. It is important to note that this is a subjective interpretation from the authors of the purpose of KSA's engagement in sports being to gain *legitimacy*. Hence, other people may interpret KSA as having a different motive for its engagement in sports, such as exploring the financial possibilities within the sporting sector.

10.2 The connection between sports and politics

An intellectual reflection in relation to *sportswashing* and the use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is the discussion of whether sports and politics should be perceived as detached from one another, and whether this distinction of the two being detached from one another is possible in practice. On the one hand, a common opinion from sports fans is that politics should be kept out of sports, as they *"want sporting prowess to be "pure", expressions of sublime skill or awe-inspiring endurance that are intrinsic to the sport and capture the genius of human athleticism"* (Malik, 2021). Furthermore, an argument for the notion that sports and politics should be kept separated is that sports provide a space for people to come together and escape the divisiveness of politics. On the other hand, as Malik (2021) also notes, even though many sports fans may wish that sports could exist in a vacuum separated from larger political and social agendas, it is not possible as social and political contexts shape both the sport and the corresponding individuals' response to it. Sports have the power to bring people together, but it also has the power to create change, as sports historically have been used as a platform for social and political activism. Moreover, sports are not just entertainment, but also a business. Sports teams, leagues, and athletes have financial and economic ties to political organizations and government entities. These ties can influence decisions made within sports organizations and leagues. Therefore, it is difficult to separate sports from politics when the business of sports is intertwined with political organizations and governments. Thus, even though a common perception among sports fans is that sports and politics should be separated, this is perceived to be a utopian scenario, as sports, and the corresponding individuals' response to it, are rooted in a social and political context. Further, as Malik (2021) notes *"Most of us want the humanness of sporting achievement to transcend the immediacy of its political and social environment. Few want sporting*

tribalism to be consumed by political divisions. Nevertheless, most recognise that sport cannot be detached from its social grounding. Nor would we want it to be. For it is that grounding that imbues sport with much of its meaning.". This quote emphasizes the paradoxical nature of the interconnectedness of sports and the political/social environment, as people want sports to be deprived of any political/social agenda to make sporting prowess *pure*, however, at the same time it is the political/social groundings that shape both the sport and the corresponding individuals' response to it. Consequently, the separation of sport from any political/social context is perceived to be somewhat utopic, as it is political/social contexts that shape both the sport and the corresponding individuals' response to it. Thus, in the context of KSA, acknowledging the interconnection between sports and politics emphasizes why KSA's involvement in sports can be perceived as a legitimation strategy. Furthermore, in the context of *sportswashing* & *sports as a legitimation strategy*, the notion of sports and politics being inseparable sparks an intriguing point of departure for discussing the implications that arise from sports and politics being perceptually inseparable.

The sporting scene has frequently been used as a scene for entities and/or sports stars to push social and political agendas, with some of the most prominent examples in recent years being the gesture of taking a knee in support of the Black Lives Matter movement and the wearing of a Ukrainian flag as a captains armband in support of Ukraine and their war against Russia (Premier League, n.d.; Miller, 2023). However, in contrast to the incorporation of these symbolic gestures in sport to support a larger political and/or social agenda, there has also been recent examples of symbolic gestures in sports that support a larger political and/or social agenda which have been banned, such as the wearing of the rainbow-colored captain's armband at the World Cup in Qatar in support of LGBTQ+ rights (Syed, 2022). In this sense, by allowing some political/social agendas to be pushed through symbolic gestures in sports, but disallowing others there is established a distinction between what is considered to be legitimate and illegitimate political and/or social agendas to push through sports. This brings forth the interesting discussion of what determines whether a political/social agenda is perceived to be legitimate or illegitimate?

This is a very interesting question to discuss based on Suchman's (1995) notion of *legitimacy* being based on a *socially constructed value system*, as people may follow different *socially constructed value systems*, and thus have different perceptions of what is considered legitimate/illegitimate political/social agendas in sports. Put in the context of KSA, on the one hand, some may perceive KSA's hosting of sports events and investments in the sporting sector as a legitimate way of using sports to pursue a political agenda that can positively develop KSA. On the other hand, others may perceive it as an illegitimate strategy to cover up KSA's wrongdoings, thus perceiving KSA as damaging the purity of sports with illegitimate political agendas. Consequently, the perception of whether KSA's hosting of sports events and investments in the sporting sector is perceived to be a legitimate or illegitimate way of interconnecting sports and politics is dependent on the observers' *socially*

constructed value systems. This leads to the question of, how to determine which political and social agendas are legitimate to push through sports, and who should determine it?

These are difficult intellectual questions to answer in a world where sports and politics are perceived to be inseparable and where people follow different, and in many cases conflicting, *socially constructed value systems*. On the one hand, a solution could be to attempt to purify sport and separate it from any political/social agenda. The International Olympic Committee has attempted to do so through its Rule 50, which prohibits any kind of demonstration or political, religious, or racial propaganda in any Olympic sites, venues, or other areas (IOC, n.d.). In this sense, the cleansing of sports for any secondary agendas acts as a strategy to accommodate the complication of people having conflicting *socially constructed value systems*, by simply perceiving any secondary agenda in sports as being illegitimate. On the other hand, as previously mentioned, sports and politics are considered to be inseparable as sports and individuals' responses to them are rooted in a social and political context. Furthermore, by simply prohibiting any kind of political/social agenda in sports, one is neglecting the power that sports historically have shown to have in terms of creating positive societal changes. Thus, while IOC's rule 50 is perceived as a viable strategy to try to accommodate the complication of people having conflicting *socially constructed value systems*, it is also perceived to be a strategy that neglects the interconnectedness of sports and politics, as well as sports' ability to create positive societal changes. Consequently, this leads back to the question of, how to determine which political and social agendas are legitimate to push through sports, and who should determine it?

As previously mentioned, people are perceived to have different, and in many cases conflicting, *socially constructed value systems*. Thus, it is perceived to be merely impossible to establish universal guidelines for what is considered legitimate political/social agendas to be pushed through sports, as what some might perceive as attempts to create positive societal changes, others might perceive as illegitimate attempts to spread propaganda. However, this also emphasizes that the constituents who determine which political/social agendas are legitimate to push through sports have great power and responsibility. By determining which agendas that are legitimate to push through sports, these constituents have the power to influence people's perception of what is considered legitimate and illegitimate. In this sense, the constituents have the responsibility of determining what is right and wrong, by allowing the agendas in sports that, in their perception, can create positive societal changes and prohibiting agendas that, in their perception, can damage societal progress. This is an interesting consideration to further discuss based on the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing and Grix & Brannagan's (2016) criticism of Nye's (1990) definition of soft power being too Western-centric (section 3.4), in terms of who/what determines whether actions are sportswashing. This will be discussed in the next section.

10.3 The definition and implications of sportswashing

10.3.1 The prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing and their implications

Following the discussion of the connection between sports and politics, it is relevant to consider if the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing can be subject to criticism for being overly Western-centric much like Nye's (1990) definition of soft power. This is due to the notion that the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing can be perceived to be based on the Western world's *socially constructed value system* as the definition is established by the Western media. Consequently, it is important to critically reflect upon and discuss the implications of the prevailing media-established definitions of the term sportswashing potentially being too Western-centric if these definitions are based on the Western world's *socially constructed value system*.

One of the key implications stemming from this notion is that the distinction between sportswashing nations and non-sportswashing nations is primarily based on whether they adhere to the *socially constructed value system* espoused by the Western world. This implies that the Western world's established *socially constructed value system* is the deciding factor in determining whether a nation's hosting of sporting events and/or funding of sports initiatives is considered legitimate or illegitimate. However, by doing so the prevailing media-established definitions are perceived to become too Western-centric, as it neglects the rest of the world's potentially conflicting *socially constructed value systems*. Furthermore, the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing are primarily based on the concept of using sports to distract from a nation's human rights violations. Thus, it is essential to reflect upon what human rights are defined as, and whether the definition is an ambiguous social construction or a universally held belief. Consequently, whether the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing are too Western-centric depends on whether the definition of human rights is viewed as a universally held belief or a construct of the Western world's *socially constructed value system*. However, if human rights is an ambiguous social construction causing people to have conflicting perceptions of what is considered human rights, then what determines whether something is considered sportswashing?

Put in the context of KSA, the Western world criticizes KSA's human rights violations and defines KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as *sportswashing* to disguise these violations (Section 9.2). However, if other parts of the world have different definitions of human rights, where KSA's treatment of people is not perceived as human rights violations, these parts of the world might not perceive KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as *sportswashing*. Based on the data used for this thesis, it is not possible to conclude whether other parts of the world share the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Consequently, future research is encouraged to examine how other parts of the world perceive KSA's

use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, to explore whether other audiences share the Western world's perception of KSA's use of the strategy.

10.3.2 The authors' definition of sportswashing and its implications

Another important aspect to discuss is the authors' definition of *sportswashing*. As outlined in section 6.1 there is a lack of academic consensus on the definition of the term sportswashing. Thus, there are multiple definitions of what sportswashing is, making it confusing as to what the term represents. To accommodate this implication, the authors decided to establish their own definition of the term in section 6.1 through a synthesis of the prevailing media-established definitions and Suchman's (1995) perspective of *legitimacy* to clearly manifest what the term *sportswashing* in this thesis refers to. On the one hand, it would have been possible to clearly manifest what the term *sportswashing* refers to in this thesis by simply referring to one of the existing definitions as the definition used for *sportswashing* in this thesis. On the other hand, the authors considered the existing definitions of the term to be vague and unable to fully encompass the concept of *sportswashing* by neglecting the perspective of *legitimacy* and the corresponding subjectivity of *legitimacy*. Consequently, the authors decided to establish their own definition of *sportswashing*. However, there are also some implications of the definition of *sportswashing* developed for this thesis. On the one hand, the definition neglects the focus on human rights violations that the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing address (Amnesty International Danmark, 2022). On the other hand, the notion of human rights violations has been left out of the definition to accommodate the consideration of whether human rights are perceived to be a universal belief or a subjective perception, as discussed in section 10.3.1. Consequently, the definition of *sportswashing* in this thesis takes a broader perspective on *sportswashing* by taking into consideration the importance and subjectivity of perception by defining *sportswashing* as a perception rather than a strategy. By defining *sportswashing* as a perception, the authors try to accommodate the subjectivity of *legitimacy* creation, in the sense that individuals may have different perceptions of a nation's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*, and thus also have different perceptions of whether it is considered *sportswashing* or not.

10.4 The effectiveness of sports as a legitimation strategy

Another interesting point of discussion related to the use of *sports as a legitimation strategy,* and the previous discussion of *sportswashing*, is whether the use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is effective as a strategy to gain *legitimacy* or not. On the one hand, the results presented in section 9 indicate that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* has predominantly not been effective. It can even be argued that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* may have had unintended consequences by inadvertently highlighting KSA's illegitimate structures, procedures, and models. Thus, by using *sports as a legitimation strategy*, KSA may have paradoxically drawn more attention to its inadequacies in terms of its political and social practices. On

the one hand, this demonstrates how *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* may have the opposite effect. On the other hand, it is only the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* that has been analyzed. Consequently, it is not possible to conclude whether KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* has been effective in gaining *legitimacy* from other audiences. Furthermore, it is not possible to conclude whether *sports as a legitimation strategy* is generally an effective or ineffective strategy to gain *legitimacy* based solely on the results of this thesis. Thus, future research is encouraged to examine how other audiences perceive KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to further explore the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. In addition, future research is also encouraged to examine the general effectiveness of *sports as a legitimation strategy* by examining the effectiveness of other nations' use of this strategy.

10.5 Contributions

The final part of the discussion aims to discuss how this thesis contributes to the academic literature. As outlined in section 3.5, the purpose of the thesis, alongside answering its research question, was to fill some of the research gaps within the concepts of *sportswashing* and *legitimacy*. One of the research gaps identified was the lack of an academic consensus on the definition of sportswashing. Thus, one of the aims of this thesis was to contribute to the establishment of an academic consensus on sportswashing. Consequently, the authors have tried to fill in this research gap and contribute to the world of academia by defining *sportswashing* as a perception that is based on an individual's socially constructed value system. This definition differs from the prevailing media-established definitions of sportswashing as it defines *sportswashing* as a perception rather than a strategy. By defining *sportswashing* as a perception that is dependent on the observer's socially constructed value system, the authors take into account interpretivism's notion that individuals from different backgrounds, under various circumstances and at different times, create and experience different realities, which result in different meanings (Saunders et al., 2016). Thus, the authors' definition of *sportswashing* contributes to the establishment of an academic consensus on the definition of sportswashing by acknowledging that people might not have the same perception of a nation's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Hence, the authors' definition of *sportswashing* accommodates the possibility that there exist different perceptions of the same phenomenon (a nation's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*) as individuals are perceived to follow differently, and in some cases conflicting socially constructed value systems. The implications of the authors' definition of *sportswashing* were further discussed in section 10.3.2.

Another research gap that the authors' aimed to fill via the thesis was Davis et al.'s (2023) notion that the academic research on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* was limited. The authors aimed to fill this research gap by specifically studying how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of the strategy. Thus, the results of the thesis are perceived to contribute to filling the research gap within the

academic literature regarding specifically how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* and the effectiveness of the strategy. However, as the purpose of filling this research gap has been embedded in the thesis' research question, the specific contributions to this specific research gap will be further outlined in section 11.

The final research gap that the authors' aimed to fill was to examine how Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies can be employed by nations, as the theory originally was designed for organizations. Thus, through the examination of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy,* the authors contribute to the academic literature on *legitimacy* by emphasizing how it is possible to apply Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to an (inter)national context. The considerations behind the transcendence of Suchman's (1995) legitimation strategies to an (inter)national context was further discussed in section 10.1.4.

11. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to examine the research question: *how does KSA use sports as a legitimation strategy and how effective is KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy?* This research question was developed based on the authors' interest in contributing to the limited academic research on the concept of *sportswashing* and the use of *sports as a legitimation strategy.*

To answer this research question, the authors have employed the analytical approach of Thematic Network Analysis. Initially, it was examined how KSA wants to be perceived by its target audiences to establish the foundation for the analysis of how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*. Subsequently, the Western world's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* was analyzed to examine the effectiveness of KSA's use of the strategy. However, before conducting the Thematic Network Analyses, the authors found it necessary to examine *why* KSA needs *legitimacy* to establish the setting for the study of the thesis' research question.

Initially, it is concluded that KSA is facing the prospect of becoming *sick* especially due to the development within the energy sector, in terms of a global transition from fossil fuels to more sustainable alternatives. KSA's economy has a high degree of dependence on the revenue derived from its exportation of fossil fuels. Consequently, the prospect of external entities lessening their reliance on fossil fuels jeopardizes KSA's economic stability and makes KSA vulnerable to becoming *sick*. However, it is concluded that KSA is aware of the aforementioned external threat of becoming *sick* and its potential implications for KSA. Furthermore, it is concluded that KSA has taken the initial steps to address the threat by developing Vision 2030 which envisions how KSA can diversify its economy to ensure the long-term prosperity of KSA. Additionally, it is also concluded that the possession of *legitimacy* is pivotal to KSA's realization of Vision 2030. Consequently, it was analyzed how KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy*.

Based on the results of the analysis of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy,* it is concluded that KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* in an attempt to gain *pragmatic, moral,* and *cognitive legitimacy*. Firstly, it is concluded that KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* by; 1. *responding* to the target audience's *need* for sports by hosting sports events or investing in international sports entities, 2. using international sports entities and stars as *character references* that vouch for KSA's reliability, and 3. continuously investing in the sporting sector and hosting sports events, to *build* a *reputation* as a sports nation. Secondly, it is concluded that KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *moral legitimacy*, by using sports to *symbolize* its conformity to Western principled ideals, with a particular emphasis on allowing Saudi Arabian women in sports and promoting their accomplishments. Thirdly, it is concluded that KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by *mimicking* its neighboring countries' strategic

initiatives within sports. Furthermore, it is concluded that KSA's strategic sports initiatives to gain *pragmatic legitimacy* are collectively considered a strategy to gain *cognitive legitimacy* by attempting to make KSA become taken for granted as an *inevitable* constituent within the world of sports. Consequently, the results of this analysis provided concluding answers to the first part of the research question: *how does KSA use sports as a legitimation strategy?*

Additionally, it is concluded that the Western world predominantly perceives KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* as an effort to mask KSA's illegitimate practices and structures or as what in this thesis is defined as *sportswashing*. Consequently, based on this predominant perception it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is ineffective in gaining *moral legitimacy*. Furthermore, there are no significant indications that the Western world predominantly assigns KSA *pragmatic* or *cognitive legitimacy* based on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. However, in contrast to the predominant results of the analysis, a minority of the Western world assign KSA *exchange legitimacy* (pragmatic) based on KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy*. The *exchange legitimacy* is attributed to KSA by observers who have a direct relationship with the country, such as sports athletes and entities, or observers who indirectly benefit from these direct relationships, such as fans of the sports athletes and entities. However, although this assignment of *exchange legitimacy* is noticeable, it is not a predominant result within the findings of this analysis. Thus, based on the results of this analysis it is concluded that KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is predominantly ineffective in gaining *legitimacy*. Consequently, the results of this analysis provided concluding answers to the last part of the research question: *how effective is KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy?*

Consequently, to answer the research question, it is concluded that KSA uses *sports as a legitimation strategy* to gain *legitimacy* by attempting to *conform to the ideals, demands, and models* of the Western World. However, KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is predominantly ineffective, as the analyzed observers predominantly perceive the strategy to be *sportswashing* and consequently do not assign KSA legitimacy.

The thesis' results contribute to the existing literature on *legitimacy* by examining how sports can be utilized as a legitimation strategy and the effectiveness of this strategy. Furthermore, the authors also contribute to the establishment of an academic consensus on the definition of *sportswashing* by considering *sportswashing* as a social construct and thereby acknowledging that what is perceived as *sportswashing* is dependent on the *socially constructed value system* of the observer. Thus, the authors also acknowledge that the effectiveness of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is dependent on the observer's *socially constructed value system*. However, this acknowledgment also establishes the main limitation of the thesis, being that the effectiveness of KSA's

use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* is dependent on who is defined as the target audience. Thus, as this thesis is based on the Western World's perception of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* to determine the effectiveness of the strategy, future research is encouraged to examine the effectiveness of KSA's use of *sports as a legitimation strategy* toward other audiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Thematic Network Analysis A+B - KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

Appendix 2: Thematic Network Analysis C - The Western world's perception of KSA's use of sports as a legitimation strategy

**The appendices are handed in separately as excel files*