



Legitimising Lockdown in Saudi Arabia: A Political Discourse Analysis of Platformed Government Communication During a Public Health Emergency

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Abstract

This study applies Teun A. van Dijk's Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) framework within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine Saudi political communication during the COVID-19 crisis. It analyses three key texts: King Salman's national address, the Ministry of Health's (MoH) public awareness campaigns particularly the "Educational Text Messages" and the MoH spokesman's speech on vaccines. The study explores how language was strategically used to legitimise government actions, construct a shared sense of national responsibility, and promote compliance with health measures. Through macro-level thematic, micro-linguistic, and socio-cognitive analysis, the research reveals that Saudi discourse employed religious authority, national identity, emotional appeals, and inclusive language to reinforce trust and unity among citizens and expatriates. The findings show a hierarchical, top-down communicative structure integrating religious legitimacy, technocratic guidance, and scientific reassurance to influence public perception and maintain ideological cohesion. Additionally, the strategic use of multiple genres and multilingual media ensured message consistency and broad reach across society. Overall, the study highlights how political discourse functions as both an ideological and communicative instrument in crisis governance, enriching the understanding of how language mediates power, ideology, and social mobilisation in centralised political contexts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Political Discourse Analysis; COVID-19; Saudi Arabia; Crisis Communication; Discursive Strategies; Socio-Cognitive Dimension.

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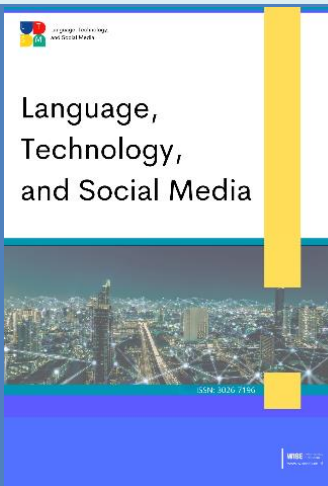
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INTRODUCTION

Discourse can be understood not merely as a neutral vehicle for describing reality, but as a form of social practice that actively constructs social relations, institutional authority, and public common sense. From a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, linguistic choices are consequential because they can reproduce inequality, consolidate ideological dominance, and normalise institutional control, particularly in contexts where the state speaks with privileged legitimacy and visibility [1], [2]. This orientation is especially productive for examining political communication, where “what is said” and “how it is said” are inseparable from the governance effects discourse seeks to achieve building consent, managing dissent, and shaping collective orientations in moments of uncertainty. Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), as developed within CDA, focuses on how political actors and institutions mobilise discourse to construct power relations, manage public perceptions, and legitimise policy actions [3], [4], [5]. In this tradition, discourse is treated as a strategic practice through which authority is asserted, solidarity is staged, and compliance is made socially intelligible, particularly when policy interventions require behavioural change across diverse publics.

This study draws on van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach to PDA, which foregrounds the interaction between discourse structures, shared social representations, and people’s mental models of events [3]. In this model, political discourse is effective when it stabilises particular interpretations of “what is happening,” “who is responsible,” and “what ought to be done,” thereby shaping the cognitive frames through which audiences evaluate legitimacy and necessity. A central mechanism is the ideological square, which explains how political actors typically enhance positive self-presentation and mitigate negative information about the in-group while marginalising or downplaying alternative viewpoints and sources of blame [6]. Importantly, the socio-cognitive lens allows analysis to move beyond isolated rhetorical features to consider how repeated linguistic patterns such as modality, evaluation, pronouns, and intertextual references work together to cultivate trust, obligation, and a sense of collective duty. This makes PDA particularly suitable for the analysis of government discourse during public health emergencies, where official language functions simultaneously as information, moral instruction, and political legitimation [7], [8].

Within contemporary communication environments, however, legitimacy is not produced through a single authoritative speech alone; it is increasingly generated through platformed and multi-channel dissemination that blends broadcast genres with digital circulation [9], [10]. State messaging often travels through orchestrated communicative infrastructures formal addresses, institutional campaigns, short-message alerts, and widely distributed briefing formats each with distinct genre constraints and audience expectations. Such cross-channel communication is not a merely technical matter: it shapes how authority is performed, how urgency is signalled, and how policy compliance is framed as rational, moral, and socially responsible.

Against this backdrop, the study analyses how lockdown was legitimised in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through official communication during a public health emergency. Saudi crisis governance offers a particularly revealing context because public communication is shaped by a hierarchical institutional ecology in which state actors speak from positions of concentrated authority, yet must address heterogeneous audiences that include both citizens and a large expatriate population. The analysis focuses on three official texts that represent distinct institutional voices and genres: a royal address by King Salman, a national awareness campaign led by the Ministry of Health, and a press briefing delivered by the Ministry’s spokesperson. Together, these texts allow

examination of how legitimacy is constructed across complementary communicative functions: announcing extraordinary measures, routinising behavioural guidance, and sustaining public reassurance as the emergency evolves. The study investigates how religious intertextuality, inclusive collectivising language, and technocratic registers are combined to frame lockdown as necessary, morally defensible, and socially unifying, while simultaneously positioning state institutions as credible guardians of public welfare.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, it offers a systematic, text-based account of how a state legitimises restrictive policy interventions through coordinated official messaging, showing how discourse helps produce unity, obligation, and disciplined social conduct at scale. Theoretically, it extends socio-cognitive PDA by treating legitimacy-building not only as a feature of elite political speech, but also as an outcome of genre orchestration across mediated communication formats, where meaning is stabilised through repetition, recontextualisation, and strategic alignment of institutional voices. By foregrounding the discursive construction of authority and solidarity within multi-channel government communication, the study advances scholarship on language, media technology, and political communication, and clarifies how discourse operates as a governance resource during emergencies that demand rapid, collective behavioural change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 and public communication

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant global impact across various levels, such as the economy, health, education, journalism, and politics [11], [12]. Diverse opinions, accusations, and analyses have emerged during the crisis, presenting a critical area for discursive investigation. To justify their actions, assign blame, and shape public behaviour, governments, institutions, and media outlets have constructed competing narratives. These discursive practices have not only influenced how the pandemic has been interpreted and responded to but have also contributed to the reinforcement of ideologies, national identities, and political agendas. As a result, the language used during the pandemic deserves scrutiny, particularly in terms of how it functions to legitimise authority, promote compliance, and frame particular groups or events in strategic ways.

As a means of clarification, recent research has highlighted the ideological role of language in fake news discourses regarding COVID-19 and other issues. Using the framework of discursive news values analysis alongside the semantic domain analysis, the study explored how fake news stories about vaccination, climate change, and COVID-19 employ distinctive news values to persuade readers [13], [14]. The results show that, unlike mainstream news, fake news heavily relies on discursive strategies such as negativity, unexpectedness, and facticity, while also utilising additional values such as subversiveness and religiosity to construct compelling and ideologically charged narratives [13]. In this study, the COVID-19 crisis, including vaccinations, is compared to other major and controversial issues, both current and long-term, such as climate change; this comparison reveals the substantial impact of COVID-19 on discourse, especially in today's technological and media landscape. On the political level, applying van Dijk's [14] model of CDA, Elyas et al. [15] examined how newspaper headlines reflected both political and ideological positioning in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The analysis revealed that U.S. headlines often implied that China was responsible for the emergence of the virus, whereas some Arab newspapers framed the early surge of cases in the KSA as a consequence of travel to Iran. These

representations demonstrate how pandemic discourse can be shaped by existing geopolitical tensions and regional rivalries, rather than relying solely on public health data. This portrayal, analysed at the cognitive level through political discourse, helps illuminate how the pandemic was not only a medical crisis but also a site for reinforcing national narratives and blame attribution. It also underscores how language contributed to shaping public perception, both within individual societies and in the global sphere, highlighting the socio-political dimensions of COVID-19 discourse. On the social-discursive level, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated fear and uncertainty that contributed to the emergence of various conspiracy theories. Marko [16] focused on the linguistic practices within an anti-COVID Facebook group to explore how language was used to spread conspiratorial narratives and construct a shared identity. The analysis revealed typical features of extremist discourse, such as ideological in-group and out-group polarisation, agentless passives to evoke fear, and intertextual references. Other strategies included misrepresentation of scientific information, colloquial expressions, humour, and irony all of which served to strengthen internal group cohesion and differentiate members from the government and the broader public, who were portrayed as oppressive or misguided [16]. This case illustrates the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on patterns of public discourse. Social media platforms, in particular, have become key arenas for the spread of alternative narratives, many of which challenge official accounts and disrupt public trust. Rather than facilitating informed debate, these digital spaces have amplified polarisation and contributed to a discursive environment marked by suspicion, fragmentation, and resistance to institutional authority. At the level of media discourse, the representation of vulnerable social groups during the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn critical attention. During the crisis, concerns arose regarding how older adults were portrayed in public communication, particularly in mainstream journalism. An analysis of 501 headlines from two prominent Spanish newspapers, *ABC* and *El País*, investigated how older individuals were framed at the peak of the pandemic [17]. Employing Shimoni [18] critical discourse studies approach alongside content analysis, the study revealed that 71.4% of the headlines depicted older adults negatively often as a uniform and highly vulnerable group associated with death, institutional neglect, or physical decline. The frequent use of generic terms such as ‘elderly’ and ‘grandparents’ contributed to constructing an ageist narrative focused on dependency and deterioration. These discursive patterns not only reinforce harmful stereotypes but may also contribute to justifying the marginalisation of older populations in policy and public discourse [17], [19].

Collectively, the studies reviewed demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic generated competing and ideologically loaded discourses across global contexts ranging from misinformation and fake news used to construct persuasive narratives, blame attribution in mainstream media, and conspiratorial resistance to institutional authority, to the marginalisation of vulnerable groups in journalistic discourse. However, less attention has been paid to how political discourse operates in centralised governance systems, particularly in shaping public perception through coordinated state-led messaging. Responding to this gap, the present study examines how Saudi political discourse during the pandemic employed language to reinforce authority, support unity, and construct shared ideological frameworks. Drawing on PDA, it explores how discourse functioned not only as a communication tool but as a mechanism of governance during a public health crisis.

Saudi Arabia's Policy Response to COVID-19

With the spread of COVID-19, most countries worldwide introduced new rules and policies, including full or partial lockdowns and vaccination programmes. While some measures were similar across nations, others varied depending on each country's policy stance and socio-political context. In response to the outbreak, Saudi Arabia implemented extensive measures across both the public and private sectors. Authorities established a coordinated governance structure to monitor developments, trace contacts, conduct mass screening, and raise public awareness. Early interventions included suspending schools, restricting domestic and international travel, and cancelling all social, religious (e.g., Hajj 2020), and sporting events implemented before the first 100 cases were confirmed [20]. Alongside these measures, the government-maintained core health services, supported international efforts to develop vaccines and treatments, and began investing in domestic production capacity. These actions reflect a highly centralised, proactive policy response aimed at controlling the virus's spread and safeguarding public health. As a result, such early and decisive measures in the KSA played a key role in limiting the virus's spread and severity [20]. In addition to its policy efforts, the Saudi government engaged in a wide-ranging communication campaign to inform and guide public behaviour. The communication strategy combined institutional authority, religious references, and inclusive slogans (e.g., We Are All Responsible, We All Return Cautiously), while employing multilingual content to reach diverse segments of the population. Multiple genres and platforms delivered these messages, utilising religious references, inclusive slogans, and multilingual materials to reach a diverse population.

Theoretical Framework

PDA is often associated with discourse produced by political actors and institutions; however, van Dijk [3] emphasises that political discourse is not defined solely by who speaks, but by what the discourse does namely, how it performs political functions and circulates ideological meanings. In this sense, PDA offers a critical lens for examining how discourse organises power relations by foregrounding strategies of legitimation, persuasion, manipulation, and the management of conflict through language and communicative practice [3]. Because political meaning is rarely confined to parliamentary speech or elite statements, PDA also extends to broader communicative domains such as policy documents, media texts, campaign messages, and public debates, where ideological representations are produced, contested, and normalised. This broader orientation is particularly relevant in contemporary mediated environments, where political authority is performed not only through formal speeches but also through institutional messaging that is distributed across multiple communication channels.

Building on van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, this study examines how official Saudi government communication discursively constructed legitimacy, authority, and social regulation during a public health emergency. Van Dijk's framework highlights the interdependence of discourse, cognition, and society, enabling analysis of how textual structures contribute to the formation of shared social representations and audience "mental models" of events, actors, responsibilities, and appropriate conduct [3]. A key analytical construct is the ideological square, which helps explain how discourse typically strengthens positive self-presentation of the in-group while minimising negative representations and marginalising alternative interpretations [21], [22]. Conceptually, this socio-cognitive lens is valuable for crisis communication analysis because it

connects micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level governance effects such as the cultivation of trust, compliance, and collective responsibility through the shaping of public interpretations.

Empirically, the analysis focuses on three official texts that represent distinct institutional voices and genres within the Saudi communication ecology: (1) King Salman's national address delivered early in the emergency, which provides a high-authority framing of the situation and the moral rationale for extraordinary measures; (2) the Ministry of Health's public awareness campaign, consisting of educational messages disseminated through mass and digital channels to standardise behavioural guidance and public responsibility; and (3) the Ministry of Health spokesperson's televised briefing delivered during the vaccination phase, which updates policy developments while sustaining reassurance and continued preventive practices. Examining these texts together allows the study to capture how legitimacy is built through cross-genre orchestration where policy justification, behavioural instruction, and institutional reassurance work cumulatively to stabilise a shared understanding of crisis governance.

PDA is therefore appropriate for this study because it provides analytical tools to examine how state discourse both reflects and reproduces power relations in moments of heightened uncertainty, when restrictive measures require public consent and behavioural alignment. Guided by van Dijk's framework, the analysis attends to macro-level themes (e.g., unity, authority, responsibility, trust) and micro-level linguistic features (e.g., pronoun choices, modality and obligation markers, evaluative lexis, intertextual references), while also considering how meanings are recontextualised through mediated distribution across communication platforms [23], [24], [25]. Through this approach, the study explains how official language functions as a governance resource articulating institutional authority, shaping public conduct, and framing lockdown as necessary and legitimate within a national narrative of solidarity.

Accordingly, the study addresses the following research question: How did the Saudi government discursively attempt to manage and legitimise lockdown during a public health emergency through official multi-channel communication?

METHODS

This research adopts van Dijk's [3] PDA framework to examine Saudi governmental discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic. The model integrates linguistic, cognitive, and social dimensions, offering a comprehensive approach for analysing how official texts construct and reinforce power relations. PDA is particularly suited for this context, as the selected texts, the King's speech, the MoH campaigns, and the MoH spokesman's address are all produced by state institutions and serve as instruments of institutional authority. This approach enables a systematic analysis of both macro-level themes and micro-level linguistic features within the broader socio-cognitive context. To further uncover ideological positioning, the analysis also draws on van Dijk's [26] ideological square, particularly its emphasis on positive self-presentation, which is applicable even in the absence of overt negative-other representation.

At the macro-level, the study identifies dominant themes and framing devices, such as the construction of institutional authority, collective responsibility, and national unity, used to shape public understanding and social norms. At the micro-level, the analysis focuses on linguistic features such as collective pronouns (fostering in-group solidarity), modality (signalling obligation or certainty), evaluative and emotional lexis (framing events and shaping affect), metaphor (conceptualising the crisis), and evidential markers (enhancing credibility). The socio-cognitive

component explores how Saudi government discourse shaped public mental models such as trust in leadership, perceived risk, and collective responsibility, particularly among citizens and expatriates. This includes attention to how these official discourses were disseminated and mediated through various state-controlled platforms, such as televised speeches, SMS campaigns, and official announcements. These channels helped ensure message consistency, authority, and reach across social strata and linguistic groups. Together, these elements illustrate how discourse functioned strategically across linguistic and contextual levels during crisis governance.

Data Collection and Sampling

This study examines four Saudi government texts selected to represent key forms of official discourse during the COVID-19 crisis. These texts were chosen for their relevance to political communication, variety of genre, and institutional authorship, aligning with the goals of PDA. First, a televised national address delivered by King Salman on 19 March 2020, published by the Saudi Press Agency, was selected as a primary example of high-level political discourse. This speech marks a crucial moment in the government's early response to the pandemic and provides insight into the state's framing of crisis, unity, and responsibility. This study examines four Saudi government texts selected to represent key forms of official discourse during the COVID-19 crisis. These texts were chosen for their relevance to political communication, variety of genre, and institutional authorship, aligning with the goals of PDA.

First, a televised national address delivered by King Salman on 19 March 2020, published by the Saudi Press Agency, was selected as a primary example of high-level political discourse. This speech marks a crucial moment in the government's early response to the pandemic and provides insight into the state's framing of crisis, unity, and responsibility. Second, an article published by the Ministry of Health on its public awareness campaigns such as *#كلنا مسؤول* ('We Are All Responsible') was collected. These campaigns, disseminated in April 2020 via the official @SaudiMoH X account and SMS, aimed to shape public behaviour and promote collective responsibility. The article provides an overview of the messaging strategies used in this mid-level institutional discourse. Third, a televised press briefing by the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health was selected, in which he highlighted new procedures, announced the final campaign *#We_All_Return_Cautiously*, and addressed the importance of vaccines. These include posts, infographics, and other digital texts aimed at shaping public behaviour and promoting collective responsibility, representing mid-level institutional discourse directed at a broad national audience. Third, a televised press briefing by the spokesperson of the Ministry of Health was selected, in which he highlighted new procedures, announced the final campaign *#We_All_Return_Cautiously*, and addressed the importance of vaccines.

Together, these texts constitute a diverse and representative dataset for analysing how language was utilised to manage the COVID-19 crisis, reinforce state authority, and construct public narratives in Saudi Arabia. [Table 1](#) summarises these selected data.

Table 1. Overview of Selected Texts for Analysis

Text No.	Title/Description	Source/Author	Date	Type and medium of Discourse
1	King Salman's National Address	Saudi Press Agency	March 2020	High-level political speech / TV
2	MoH Campaign Materials	MoH (@SaudiMoH)	April 2020	Public health campaign / social media and SMS
3	MoH's spokesman	Centre for Government Communication (@cgc)	December 2020	Governmental speech / TV and social media

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

King Salman's speech: A royal address at the onset of the pandemic

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, delivered a speech to all citizens and foreign residents. This transcript, issued during the early months of the pandemic, represents the highest level of political communication and reflects the official royal stance on the crisis at a national level:

Praise be to God and peace be upon His Messenger. My brothers and sisters. My sons and daughters the citizens and residents of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, peace and Allah's mercy be upon you. You are all aware, may God bless and protect you, that the world is suffering due to the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus pandemic, may God protect us and the world from its harm. We are living through a difficult phase of the world's history. However, we are completely certain that this phase will end and pass, despite its harsh and bitter difficulties, with belief in God's words: (Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease, Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease). This crisis will become a piece of history that proves man's defiance in the face of this hardship humankind is experiencing. Your nation, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, continues to take all precautionary measures to confront this pandemic and limit its effects. We depend on the aid of God Almighty, then on deploying our full capabilities, supported by your strong determination to face adversities with the steadfastness of believers at the forefront. The strength, steadfastness, determination that you have demonstrated during the honorable defiance of this difficult phase, and your full cooperation with relevant government agencies, are the most important contributing factors and pillars of the success of the state's efforts, which has prioritized safeguarding health and made it the state's top concern. Therefore, rest assured that we are very keen on providing the necessary medication, food, and living necessities for citizens and residents of this blessed land. All government sectors, led by the Ministry of Health, are doing all they can and taking all necessary measures to ensure the health of the nation's citizens and residents. (Saudi Press Agency, 2020)

Although the pandemic is a global issue, explicitly acknowledged in the speech as 'a difficult phase of the world's history,' the discourse frames it around unity, resilience, and divine support. The term 'phase' also metaphorically characterises the crisis as a temporary yet critical stage. While this aligns with what van Dijk [3] refers to as 'threatening metaphors' often used in political and media discourse to signal urgency or danger, its usage here simultaneously downplays permanence,

suggesting that the hardship is manageable and will eventually pass. This strategic framing promotes public reassurance and reinforces confidence in state authority. The crisis is portrayed as a divine test: temporary and conquerable, invoking religious discourse and Quranic intertextuality to encourage faith and patience. The use of ‘brothers and sisters’ and inclusive references to ‘citizens and residents’ strengthens a paternalistic tone and a shared national identity. Reassurance and authority are further underscored through repeated statements that the situation is under control and that essential aid, medication, food, and necessities is assured. This framing presents Saudi Arabia as both spiritually blessed and administratively capable, dedicated to safeguarding all within its borders. Delivered via official national television and state-controlled media, the King’s speech was carefully framed to amplify its macro-discursive goals namely reassurance, unity, and divine trust. The use of religious and paternalistic language, combined with audiovisual cues, reinforced the emotional resonance of the message and supported top-down ideological messaging. This media framing ensured consistency, extended the speech’s reach, and strengthened public alignment with the government’s crisis response.

To be more specific, the speech begins with distinctly Islamic religious language, including phrases such as ‘Praise be to God and peace be upon His Messenger,’ ‘may God bless and protect you,’ and ‘may God protect us and the world from its harm.’ These expressions not only establish a tone that is both reverent and serious, while situating the discourse within a context of divine dependence and moral authority. The use of the Qur’anic verse ‘Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease, indeed, with hardship [will be] ease’ which itself contains a deliberate repetition serves to emphasise divine reassurance and instil patience, reinforcing a sense of spiritual endurance rooted in Islamic belief. In addition, the King strategically employs familial terms, referring to the audience as ‘brothers,’ ‘sisters,’ ‘sons,’ and ‘daughters,’ that promotes a paternal and inclusive tone. This use of familial address builds a relationship of care, intimacy, and moral responsibility between the monarch and the people, enhancing the credibility of the message [27], [28]. The speech also relies heavily on pronoun usage to develop solidarity and shared identity. The first-person possessive ‘my’ (e.g., ‘my brothers’) suggests a personal connection, while the second-person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’ directly involve the audience. More importantly, the inclusive ‘we,’ ‘our,’ and ‘us’ are used to construct a collective stance and mutual responsibility between the government and the population e.g., ‘We depend on the aid of God,’ and ‘our full capabilities.’ According to van Dijk [3], both pronoun ‘we’ and ‘our’ have ‘implications for the political position, alliances, solidarity, and other socio-political position of the speaker.’ This strategic use of pronouns aims to diminish hierarchical distance and frame the response as a united national effort. Concerning modality, the speech features various modal expressions that reflect degrees of possibility, certainty, and obligation. The religious-oriented modals (e.g., ‘may God protect us’) invoke divine will. The statement, ‘This crisis will become a piece of history,’ uses the modal verb ‘will’ to express optimism and certainty about overcoming adversity. Additionally, the phrase ‘are doing all they can and taking all necessary measures’ implies obligation and total commitment from the government. These modals collectively contribute to a tone of hope, competence, and reassurance. The extent to which ‘lexical choice and variation’ is effective in discourse is clearly demonstrated throughout the speech [29], [30], [31].

The speech contains a dense concentration of evaluative and metaphorical expressions that serve to legitimise governmental actions and support national resilience. The pandemic is framed in strongly negative evaluative terms, such as ‘suffering,’ ‘harsh,’ ‘bitter,’ and ‘difficult phase of the

world's history,' which emphasise the severity and historical uniqueness of the crisis. In contrast, the government and the public are positively appraised through phrases such as 'strong determination,' 'steadfastness,' and 'honourable defiance,' constructing a heroic and unified national identity. The phrase 'this blessed land' exemplifies the use of religious-nationalist evaluative lexis that sacralises the nation itself. Furthermore, metaphorical language can contribute to framing the issue cognitively [26], [32]. The pandemic is described as a 'piece of history,' suggesting eventual triumph; public efforts are the 'pillars of the success of the state's efforts,' invoking a construction metaphor; and the population is urged to 'face adversities with the steadfastness of believers at the forefront,' which draws on military and religious metaphors to position citizens as faithful defenders of the nation. These discursive strategies enhance the legitimacy of state actions and mobilise collective sentiment in support of institutional authority during the crisis.

In political contexts, political actors operate with cognitive frameworks, mental representations of the situation, argument, or audience, that shape how they construct discourse. In this case, the speech's producer is the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, the King Salman of the KSA, an authoritative figure for Muslims. The primary audience comprises Saudi citizens and foreign residents, most of whom are Muslim. Accordingly, the speech heavily draws on Islamic rhetoric. It incorporates religious terminology such as 'God,' 'Messenger,' and 'Allah,' and employs intertextuality through the quotation of a Qur'anic verse framing the pandemic as a phase of 'hardship' followed by 'ease.' Through this framing, the king conveys certainty that the crisis will 'end and pass.' Ideologies, understood as socially shared belief systems [26], provide the cognitive foundation for political discourse. In this case, both Islamic and nationalist ideologies shape the mental model underpinning the speech. The speaker activates shared cultural and religious knowledge, using expressions such as 'may God bless and protect you' and 'your nation, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.' These references appeal to the audience's 'cultural common ground' and contribute to the discourse's persuasive effect [26]. This strategy is reinforced by the use of inclusive pronouns, especially 'we,' a frequent feature of political discourse that promotes solidarity [26]. While the 'royal we' may typically refer to the monarch alone, in this context it signifies a broader unity between the monarchy, citizens, and residents.

The speech is thus grounded in collective mental representations of unity, resilience, and divine support. Citizens are positioned as central to the state's success, and expatriates are explicitly included, constructing a shared national identity and common responsibility. In other words, the pandemic itself is conceptualised as a global trial that can be overcome through faith and cooperation. The speech also employs presupposition [26], for instance, through the phrase 'you are all aware' which assumes shared knowledge of the crisis. This reinforcement of perceived shared understanding underscores the urgency and seriousness of the situation as common knowledge, bypassing the need for further justification.

In the section where the King outlines the government's response, the discourse reinforces a shared mental model in which citizens and residents are cast as vital participants in the national response, with their 'strength,' 'steadfastness,' and 'cooperation' described as foundational to the state's success. The government is portrayed as not only authoritative but also responsive and attentive to public needs, committed to 'providing the necessary medication, food, and living necessities.' This narrative cognitively affirms the state's role as a protective and dependable actor. By highlighting both divine reliance and practical intervention, the speech activates audience

schemas rooted in faith, duty, and communal resilience. This dual emphasis promotes alignment between institutional discourse and public cognition, promoting national unity and legitimising the government's crisis management.

MoH Public Awareness Campaigns: 'Educational Text Messages'

This section examines the MoH's public awareness efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on the 'Educational Text Messages'. These messages represent institutional communication aimed at shaping public behaviour and promoting health-conscious practices:

In cooperation with the Communications and Information Technology Commission (CITC), MoH has sent out over 3.6 billion awareness text messages on the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) to various segments of citizens and residents. The messages were sent in various languages and posted on MoH's official platforms and its awareness platform 'Live Well' on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram. These educational text messages included tips and guidelines on how to address the virus. They explained the ways to prevent its spread, and deal with rumors about it. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of washing hands with soap and water, staying at home, avoiding crowding, using tissues for sneezing, and keeping at a distance of one and a half between one another. The messages also explained the correct method of receiving orders at home. In addition, they contained information on professions that increase the spread of the disease. Nearly 202601 individuals have received these messages. MoH stated that the number of video views exceeded 103,000. The website recorded more than 15 million visits, and the number of responses to the new Coronavirus test via 'Mawid' (Appointment) application reached over 377,000. Moreover, 480 television educational breaks were produced and broadcasted on TV, in addition to 422 designed educational publications. Several awareness campaigns were launched, including 'Athreenkom' (You're Excused), and 'Metr wa Nesf' (A Meter and a Half) initiatives. An awareness channel was also launched on Telegram to make it easier for beneficiaries to download these productions and share them with others. About 137,000 individuals have benefited from them so far. Additionally, a comprehensive educational guide was issued. It included advice for citizens returning to KSA. This step comes in continuation of the novel Coronavirus awareness campaign launched by MoH in conjunction with the outbreak of the virus, under the theme "Prevent Coronavirus". It aims to educate all members of the society about the new Coronavirus. It also guides them towards correct behaviors that contribute to preventing the disease and limiting its spread. MoH stressed the importance of obtaining information from reliable sources, such as the Ministry's e-portal and its official accounts on social media. Citizens can also obtain information through the official account of 937 Service Center and Live Well's account, which is dedicated to raising awareness about COVID-19. MoH called on everyone to support the efforts made to combat this virus and do whatever needed to limit its spread. Moreover, it called upon citizens and residents to contact phone number (937) to have their inquiries answered and be provided with consultations on the novel Coronavirus 24/7. The Ministry stressed that everyone should adhere to the awareness instructions it issued to avoid infection.

The MoH's awareness campaign, launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflects a centralised, top-down communication strategy aimed at shaping public behaviour. Disseminated through official, state-controlled media and digital platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, and national television, the campaign presented a unified discourse of guidance, discipline, and national solidarity. While it was framed as a public health initiative, the messaging was embedded within a broader political narrative that emphasised institutional authority and collective responsibility. For instance, phrases such as 'prevent the disease,' 'deal with rumors,' 'correct behaviors,' and the prominent slogan 'We Are All Responsible' repeatedly appeared across the media. In addition, campaigns such as 'Athreenkom' (You're Excused) and 'Metr wa Nesf' (A Meter and a Half) drew on culturally resonant phrases to promote social distancing and collective vigilance. The use of

multilingual messaging further reflected inclusive governance, extending its reach to both citizens and expatriates. Visual and verbal cues, including infographics, video clips, and direct regulations, conveyed health information and served as instruments of ideological communication. Through this media infrastructure, the MoH positioned the government as informed, compassionate, and decisive, thereby supporting the macro-discursive objectives of the campaign: cultivating compliance, enhancing institutional trust, and aligning public sentiment with the state's crisis management agenda.

Regarding the linguistic choices, the MoH's discourse relies on specific linguistic choices that serve to guide public behaviour and support compliance. The campaign's language is heavily instructional, characterised by imperatives such as 'wash hands,' 'stay at home,' and 'avoid crowding,' which function as direct behavioural commands. This prescriptive tone, repeated across multiple platforms, serves to not only instruct but also normalise state-sanctioned practices during the pandemic. Such repetitions of health-related phrases and behavioural directives serve as a key strategy for highlighting preferred meanings and anchoring them in public mental models [33]. The campaign also reflects broader shifts in public discourse. As Salameh Jiménez [34] notes, contemporary institutional discourse is increasingly shaped by a process of conversationalisation, adopting more accessible and less formal registers to engage the public. In this context, the Ministry frames its directive messages through pragmatic speech acts that combine instruction and reassurance.

This aligns with van Dijk's [33] observation that political and institutional discourse typically employs a range of illocutionary acts, assertions, commands, and advice, to guide public behaviour while sustaining authority. The use of collective pronouns, particularly in phrases such as 'We are all responsible,' reinforces social cohesion and shared accountability, positioning the public as co-participants in national health efforts. Once, again. pronouns such as 'we' and 'our' function as political tools to express solidarity and shared purpose [33]. Though the speaker is an institutional body, the inclusive language reduces hierarchical distance and invites identification with the message. Modal expressions such as 'should' are evident through recurrent obligation-driven constructions (e.g., 'Everyone should adhere to the awareness instructions'), which signal both urgency and necessity. Such modals help establish an institutional tone of authority, implying that compliance is not only expected but also morally appropriate [35]. Lexical choices are central to the campaign's effectiveness. The frequent repetition of terms such as 'awareness,' 'instructions,' and 'prevention' reinforces the campaign's educational purpose, while emotionally neutral vocabulary (e.g., 'correct behaviours,' 'deal with rumours') frames the government's role as rational and informative rather than coercive. The slogan 'Prevent Coronavirus' acts as a unifying lexical anchor, encapsulating the campaign's central goal and encouraging public participation. Meanwhile, the imperative tone of the campaign is softened through the use of culturally embedded expressions such as '*Athreenkom*' (You're Excused) and '*Metr wa Nesf*' (A Meter and a Half). These familiar linguistic choices enhance emotional appeal, facilitate audience identification, and reinforce institutional legitimacy within everyday social contexts. Altogether, this micro-level analysis reveals how the MoH's discourse strategically blends linguistic simplicity, repetition, pragmatic force, and cultural familiarity to promote compliance, reinforce trust, and shape public conduct in alignment with the state's ideological aims.

Hence, the MoH's awareness campaign constructs a mental model of the pandemic as a serious yet manageable threat. It cognitively positions the public to recognise that cooperating with

official instructions is not merely advisable but expected. Through calls to ‘support the efforts,’ ‘prevent the disease,’ and ‘limit its spread,’ the discourse invites individuals to adopt a belief system in which compliance is equated with social responsibility and moral duty. In this way, the campaign shapes shared knowledge and activates cognitive schemas of disciplined, cooperative citizenship. As previously observed, the discourse employs repetition and lexical consistency to reinforce preferred behavioural scripts. These patterns function cognitively to enhance message retention and internalisation key strategies in persuasion and belief formation within political discourse [33]. Directly, addressing both ‘citizens and residents’ and employing multilingual content, the campaign constructs mental models grounded in inclusivity and shared responsibility. It invites all recipients, regardless of nationality, to perceive themselves as equally accountable participants in the national response.

This reflects one aspect of van Dijk’s [26] ideological square, namely the positive self-presentation of the in-group. Notably, and similar to the King’s address, this discourse avoids negative-other representation; there is no attribution of blame or marginalisation of any group. Instead, it promotes a unified social identity and collective obligation, reinforcing national solidarity without invoking exclusionary or discriminatory narratives. Further to this, presuppositions embedded in the campaign’s wording (e.g., assuming awareness of the virus or institutional credibility) further reflect an attempt to streamline communication. Such moves reduce the need for elaboration and cognitively position institutional knowledge as self-evident, thereby encouraging uncritical acceptance and immediate action. Thus, campaign operates cognitively by shaping beliefs, aligning with existing mental models rooted in trust, duty, and unity, and reinforcing the ideological underpinnings of state-led crisis management.

The MoH’ spokesperson’s speech: #We_All_Return_Cautiously

Following the nationwide lockdown, the Saudi government announced a gradual return to normal life, conditional upon adherence to safety protocols and widespread vaccination. In this context, the MoH spokesperson delivered a public address launching the final awareness campaign, #We_All_Return_Cautiously, which emphasised the importance of vaccines and outlined the new health procedures required for the safe reopening of society:

Regarding the vaccines, praise be to Allah, there are very promising developments and highly significant results that have emerged for a number of important vaccines. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, through its committees and relevant authorities, has praise be to Allah successfully secured very important agreements with companies developing these vaccines. By the will of Allah, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will be among the first countries where the vaccine will be available.

We are fully aware that vaccines are a very important step in confronting this historic pandemic. Vaccines, in general, have proven throughout history to be among the most important innovations, most significant measures, and most vital health procedures undertaken by humanity to protect mankind and humanity as a whole.

Until then, it is extremely important that we adhere to the precautionary measures. *We All Return Cautiously* is our current and future slogan, and it will remain with us until the end of this pandemic.

Although presented as a technical update on vaccine developments, the speech serves a broader macro-discursive purpose of reassurance, alignment, and ideological reinforcement. It frames the pandemic as a historic challenge requiring both scientific innovation and divine trust.

The speaker explicitly links the success in securing vaccine agreements to Allah's will, blending biomedical progress with religious discourse. This dual framing enhances institutional credibility and moral authority, depicting the government as both scientifically proactive and spiritually guided. The statement, 'We are fully aware that vaccines are a very important step,' positions the government as rational, knowledgeable, and globally aligned. Simultaneously, invoking divine will ('by the will of Allah,' 'praise be to Allah') suggests that institutional actions are morally justified and religiously legitimate. This intersection of religion and science strengthens public trust across a broad ideological spectrum. Media-wise, the speech was delivered by the official spokesperson of the MoH during a live press briefing broadcast on national television and shared through official digital platforms. This formal delivery ensures consistency and broad reach, reinforcing the state's authority. The campaign slogan 'We All Return Cautiously,' introduced at this advanced stage of the pandemic, discursively marks a gradual transition out of lockdown while urging continued vigilance. As a communication tool, the slogan encapsulates the macro message of cautious optimism and collective responsibility. Repeated references to adherence and precaution are echoed across media channels, visually and verbally reinforcing compliance as a national duty.

The spokesperson's speech is carefully crafted to balance reassurance and caution. It opens with 'praise be to Allah' and continues with 'by the will of Allah,' anchoring the message in a religious framework that appeals to shared cultural values and enhances moral authority for the institutional voice. These expressions reflect a discursive blend of divine trust and institutional confidence, legitimising the government's actions as both morally sound and scientifically informed. Lexically, the speech employs highly evaluative and emphatic language. Phrases such as 'very promising developments,' 'highly significant results,' and 'very important agreements' elevate the perceived success of the government's vaccine strategy. The repetition of the superlative 'most' in phrases such as 'most important innovations,' 'most significant measures,' and 'most vital health procedures' functions as an intensification technique. This deliberate rhetorical repetition helps create a mental image of vaccines as the ultimate solution maximising their perceived necessity and positioning them as humanity's greatest defence. The government and the public share ownership, as shown by the use of 'we' and 'our.' The phrase 'we are fully aware' asserts knowledge and control, while inviting collective understanding. Similarly, the reference to 'mankind and humanity as a whole' broadens the speech's moral scope, presenting the KSA as acting on behalf of global welfare, not just national interests. Modality also plays a vital role in discourse and power [3]. This is evident in both modal verbs and evaluative expressions. Phrases such as 'will be among the first,' 'it is extremely important,' and 'will remain with us until the end' construct a forward-looking and authoritative stance, signalling certainty, institutional resolve, and the necessity of public compliance. The slogan 'We All Return Cautiously' encapsulates the campaign's pragmatic ethos. The inclusive 'we' fosters solidarity, while the adverb 'cautiously' conveys continuous awareness.

Hence, the speech creates a mental model of the pandemic as a serious but manageable challenge, one that will pass with divine will, national capability, and collective effort. Three key ideas are discursively presented to the audience: first, that the pandemic will eventually end with the help of Allah and the proactive role of the Saudi government; second, that the vaccine is the most crucial step towards that goal; and third, that normal life will return, but only through continued caution and shared responsibility. This cognitive framework is reinforced through a combination of religious and scientific discourse. The speaker invokes divine will through repeated religious

expressions, ‘praise be to Allah’ (twice) and ‘by the will of Allah’, and national pride through phrases such as ‘among the first countries,’ which imply competence and preparedness. These expressions activate culturally shared beliefs and position the KSA as both spiritually guided and scientifically innovative. The phrase ‘we are fully aware that vaccines are a very important step’ presupposes collective agreement and shared understanding, avoiding doubt and reinforcing ideological certainty [36], [37]. Similarly, the historical framing of vaccines as ‘one of the most important innovation undertaken by humanity’ appeals to a broader understanding of progress, health, and collective safety, thereby affirming the government’s strategy. The inclusive use of ‘we’ and the slogan ‘We All Return Cautiously’ mentally situate all members of society as equal participants in a gradual and controlled return to normalcy. This endorses a mental script of unity, caution, and shared duty. It reflects a positive self-presentation, where ‘we’ is proactive, rational, and united, emphasising an inclusive and responsibility-driven narrative [3].

Discussion

The analysis uncovers a deliberate, top-down communicative structure orchestrated by the Saudi government across three official texts, each produced at different stages of the pandemic and by actors occupying distinct positions within the socio-political hierarchy. Starting with the King’s speech, anchored in religious-national discourse, authority is asserted through the highest political and spiritual figure in the Kingdom. This key address legitimises institutional action through Islamic references and paternalistic appeals, establishing a moral tone that frames the pandemic not only as a health crisis but also as a shared ethical challenge. The MoH then operationalised this framing by disseminating over three billion educational messages across various platforms. These messages, delivered in multiple languages, promoted social behaviours rooted in hygiene, compliance, and communal responsibility, effectively translating institutional authority into everyday public conduct and embedding them as social norms [38], [39]. The spokesman’s later address reframed the discourse through scientific rationality and cautious optimism, emphasising vaccine procurement, the historical success of immunisation, and the importance of continued vigilance. Collectively, these discourses demonstrate a strategic layering of genre, voice, and modality: religious-political legitimacy, technocratic instruction, and scientific reassurance.

A central feature across these texts is the fusion of religious language and ideological framing to secure legitimacy and encourage compliance. The King’s invocation of divine will and the Ministry’s ongoing use of Islamic references indicate the centrality of shared belief systems in shaping public perception. Rather than merely offering reassurance, this religious framework positions the government’s actions within a higher moral order, activating shared mental models that legitimise state directives. This ideological effort is reinforced through inclusive pronouns, intertextual references, and appeals to collective identity, constructing a national ‘we’ united by faith, resilience, and adherence. This sense of togetherness is further highlighted by metaphors such as being ‘in the same boat’ [40], [41], which position the government and people as jointly responsible actors. The absence of negative representations, such as racialised blame, xenophobic rhetoric, or scapegoating during the crisis (e.g., see Kakisina et al. [42]), is particularly notable when compared to global pandemic discourses that attributed responsibility to specific nations or groups. In this case, avoiding exclusionary or discriminatory narratives strengthens the positive self-presentation of the state, aligning with ideological square and reinforcing an image of the KSA as unified, just, and globally responsible.

Discourse can be employed to overcome challenges [43], [44], particularly during times of crisis when language becomes a vehicle for both governance and persuasion. Ultimately, the Saudi COVID-19 discourse was not merely informational but profoundly ideological designed to manage the crisis while maintaining political stability. Through the strategic blending of spiritual and administrative authority, the discourse positions civic compliance as both a public duty and a moral imperative. This convergence amplifies the persuasive power of the messaging, especially in a context where religion plays an integral role in daily life. In this sense, the pandemic was not only a moment of public health mobilisation but also a discursive opportunity to reaffirm national unity and institutional legitimacy. The perceived coherence and coordination of the Kingdom’s crisis response may be attributed to this hierarchical discourse structure, whereby each communicative act contributed to shaping public understanding, promoting compliance, and reinforcing ideological alignment from the top down. Table 2 summarises the discursive layering across actors, genres, and communicative strategies used in the government’s pandemic response.

Table 2. Top-down discursive strategies of Saudi COVID-19 response

Stage of discourse	Actor	Genre/Modality	Key strategies	Ideological functions
Initial stage: King’s speech	King Salman (Head of state)	Religious-national rhetoric, moral leadership	Invoke divine will, national unity, and paternal care	Legitimise state response via religious authority and shared moral order
Mid stage: MoH awareness campaign	MoH (Institutional authority)	Technocratic instructions, mass media messaging	Issue multilingual messages promoting hygiene and compliance	Translate intuitional authority into routine social behaviour
Final stage: MoH spokesman’s address	Moh spokesman (Public health representative)	Scientific reassurance, public health announcement	Emphasis vaccine success, historical continuity, and sustained caution	Frame vaccination and cautious return to normal life as civic duty

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined how the Saudi government constructed its COVID-19 crisis response through political discourse, focusing on three official texts: the king’s speech, the MoH awareness campaign, and the spokesman’s address. Applying van Dijk’s PDA model, the analysis demonstrated how the government strategically employed religious authority, national identity, and inclusive rhetoric to frame the pandemic as a temporary yet serious challenge, one to be overcome through divine will, national solidarity, and public cooperation. Through lexical choices, intertextual references, and state-controlled communication channels, the discourse legitimised

institutional authority and promoted compliance with state directives. Ultimately, the crisis was portrayed not only as a public health emergency but also as a test of national unity and collective responsibility. This underscores how political discourse during crises functions not merely to inform but to shape public consciousness and reinforce ideological cohesion.

This study offers detailed insights into the Saudi government's discursive strategies during the COVID-19 crisis, but it also acknowledges several limitations. First, while the analysis focused on official government texts, including speeches, campaigns, and public health communications, it did not examine how these messages were received, interpreted, or negotiated by the public. Future research might explore audience reception, especially among different demographic groups such as expatriates, religious communities, or youth. Second, this study's scope was limited to government-produced discourse. Analysing alternative or dissenting discourses, such as social media or private communication networks, could reveal how the public navigates, resists, or reappropriates state narratives during crises.

LIMITATIONS

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

J.S.A.A. conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted the analysis, and led the manuscript drafting process. T.E. supervised the research design, provided methodological guidance, and critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content. N.A. assisted with data validation, contributed to the thematic coding reliability checks, and helped interpret the findings. R.G. supported participant recruitment, managed ethical and administrative procedures, and contributed to proofreading and structural revisions of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DECLARATION OF USE OF AI IN SCIENTIFIC WRITING

The authors employed ChatGPT (OpenAI) to help with language development, clarity enhancement, and academic prose structure. Following the use of the tool, the authors carefully examined, confirmed, and revised all content to guarantee correctness, conformity to ethical scientific standards, and alignment with the study's conclusions. The content of this publication is entirely the responsibility of the authors.

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