

Media Discourse and the Framing of Gulf Elite Connections in the Epstein Case: A Comparative Study of France24 Arabic and WatanOnline

¹*Zaqlul Ammar, ¹Aristya Luna Rahmatul Ula, ¹Miftachul Jannah, ¹Abdul Muntaqim Al Anshory, ²Sulthan Naufal

¹ Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Jalan Gajayana No. 50, Jatimulyo, Malang, East Java, Indonesia

² Faculty of Arabic and Islamic sciences, Al-Azhar University Cairo, Permanent Camp Street, Nasr City Cairo, Egypt

*Corresponding Author e-mail: zaqlul.zulkifli@gmail.com

Received: January 2026; Revised: February 2026; Accepted: March 2026; Published: March 2026

Abstract

This study examines how Arabic-language media construct meaning around alleged Gulf elite connections in the Jeffrey Epstein case, a transnational controversy involving issues of legitimacy, secrecy, and institutional authority. While framing research has widely explored domestic political scandals, limited attention has been given to how Arabic-language outlets frame transnational elite allegations within their institutional and geopolitical contexts. Positioned within discourse and media linguistics, this study analyzes how language operates as a symbolic resource in shaping political meaning. Using qualitative content analysis grounded in William A. Gamson's interpretive package framework, the study analyzes two Arabic-language news articles published by France24 Arabic and WatanOnline. Framing devices (metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, depictions, visual images) and reasoning devices (roots, appeals to principle, consequences) are systematically identified to reveal how interpretive packages are constructed. The findings indicate two contrasting orientations. France24 Arabic advances an institutional-procedural frame emphasizing documentation, formal political access, and state legitimacy. In contrast, WatanOnline constructs a network-of-influence frame highlighting secrecy, relational dependency, and concealed mediation. The study extends Gamson's framing model to transnational elite scandals in Arabic media and demonstrates that framing functions as a linguistic mechanism shaping perceptions of elite legitimacy and political power.

Keywords: Media discourse; Framing; France24; Jeffrey Epstein case; WatanOnline

How to Cite: Ammar, Z., Ula, A.L.R., Jannah, M., Al Anshory, A.M., & Naufal, S. (2026). Media Discourse and the Framing of Gulf Elite Connections in the Epstein Case: A Comparative Study of France24 Arabic and WatanOnline. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, 6(1), 338-353. doi: <https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i1.4656>



<https://doi.org/10.36312/jolls.v6i1.4656>

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media play a decisive role in shaping public understanding of political controversies, particularly those involving transnational elites, institutional legitimacy, and reputational crisis. Reporting on elite scandals does not merely recount allegations. It actively constructs interpretive meaning through narrative selection, symbolic emphasis, and causal explanation. In this sense, media discourse operates as a mechanism that structures social reality (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). The case of Jeffrey Epstein represents a paradigmatic example of how criminal proceedings may evolve into global political narratives implicating networks of finance, diplomacy, and elite authority. When such narratives intersect with references to Gulf political actors, they enter complex geopolitical terrain in which legitimacy, secrecy, and state authority become discursively contested.

Although the Epstein case originated within the United States, it rapidly expanded into a transnational controversy. Pokorny (2025) characterizes the case as one of the most consequential failures of the modern American criminal justice system, highlighting structural breakdown rather than isolated misconduct. Official acknowledgments by the U.S. Department of Justice, combined with evidence that 72 percent of identified law enforcement contact points represented failure or inadequate action (Pokorny, 2025), underscore its institutional dimension. This case is an international normative discourse, connected to broader debates about child protection and gender justice (Mauludin & Kusvita, 2024). Consequently, when Arabic-language media address alleged Gulf elite connections, they do not simply engage in scandal reporting. They participate in constructing narratives about institutional accountability, geopolitical legitimacy, and moral scrutiny across borders.

The contemporary media environment intensifies this dynamic. Digital ecosystems amplify polarization in controversies involving elite misconduct (Bennett & Livingston, 2018), while cross-platform divergence enables sharply contrasting interpretations of identical events (Fletcher et al., 2020). In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, framing may either stabilize institutional authority or expose hidden influence networks (Votmer & Sorensen, 2014). The Epstein case has also circulated widely within conspiratorial digital discourse. Smith et al. (2025) observe that conspiracy narratives gain legitimacy through repetition in online spaces, while Schattoeckrodt et al. (2024) demonstrate how alternative media ecosystems incubate distrust-driven frames. Deverna et al. (2024) further show that misinformation correction often fails due to ideological reinforcement mechanisms, reinforcing the persistence of polarized interpretations. Elite scandals therefore become arenas of narrative competition rather than neutral sites of information exchange.

Framing theory offers a robust conceptual lens for analyzing this competition. Framing is the construction of interpretive packages organized around central themes that render complex issues intelligible (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Framing directs attention, attributes causality, and embeds moral evaluation (Gamson, 1989; Scheufele, 1996). It contributes to collective identity formation (Snow & Benford, 1988), operates through patterned emphasis (Gitlin, 1980), and may be differentiated into media framing and audience framing (Scheufele, 1999). These theoretical developments converge on a central premise. Media do not reflect reality passively. They construct it through symbolic selection and structured reasoning.

Within Gamson's model, framing devices include metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, depictions, and visual images. These devices condense symbolic meaning. Reasoning devices consist of roots, appeals to principle, and consequences, which supply causal and normative coherence (Gamson, 1989; Intizar et al., 2024). Media constructions are shaped by institutional logic, professional routines, and ideological orientation (Manju et al., 2023), as well as broader geopolitical and cultural contexts (Arsyad et al., 2025). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that framing is inherently ideological because interpretive packages reflect institutional agendas (Amir et al., 2023; Gasparyan & Sirotkina, 2025). In elite scandals, framing determines whether proximity to power is narrated as legitimate institutional access or as covert systemic brokerage (Cushion et al., 2018; Entman & Usher, 2023). Visual cues further reinforce ideological positioning by embedding symbolic authority or suspicion (Bast, 2021).

Extensive scholarship has applied Gamson's framework across political news, electoral dynamics, public policy debates, and social movements (Adzhani & Ginting, 2018; Akmal et al., 2023; Arrosyid et al., 2021; Efendi, 2020; Pamungkas et al., 2024; Septiani et al., 2024). Recent studies have extended framing analysis to digital ecosystems characterized by misinformation and ideological asymmetry (Amir et al.,

2023; Deverna et al., 2024; López-Rabadán, 2022; Schatto-eckrodt et al., 2024). Others have examined audiovisual media and multimodal communication (Hafidli et al., 2023; Meilisa & Julianto, 2025; Tambunan & Nurfadilla, 2021) as well as geopolitical conflicts and humanitarian crises (Fauzi & Fianamalia, 2025; Nafiudin & Basid, 2025; Septiani et al., 2024). Collectively, these studies confirm the analytical strength of framing devices and reasoning devices in explaining how legitimacy, morality, and power are constructed.

However, despite this theoretical and empirical richness, a significant gap remains. Much framing research continues to focus on domestic political contests, national scandals, or electoral competition (Akmal et al., 2023; Zamroni et al., 2021). Even studies addressing misinformation and ideological asymmetry rarely examine how Arabic-language media construct transnational elite scandals embedded within global geopolitical tensions (Deverna et al., 2024; López-Rabadán, 2022). While global scholarship has scrutinized institutional failure in the Epstein case (Mauludin & Kusvita, 2024; Pokorny, 2025), limited attention has been devoted to how Arab media frame alleged Gulf elite connections within their specific institutional orientations and discursive traditions. The absence of systematic analysis of Arabic-language framing in this context represents a theoretical and empirical gap in comparative media studies.

The central research problem concerns how different institutional media actors construct divergent interpretations of elite legitimacy within a shared transnational controversy. When identical documentary references circulate across outlets, why do they produce distinct narrative logics? How do symbolic and causal elements combine to stabilize competing interpretive packages? Addressing this analytical puzzle requires moving beyond descriptive comparison toward systematic identification of framing and reasoning mechanisms embedded in discourse.

This study responds to that problem by comparing France 24 Arabic and WatanOnline, two outlets with contrasting institutional orientations. France 24 Arabic operates as an international broadcaster embedded within formal journalistic norms emphasizing verification and diplomatic neutrality. WatanOnline adopts a more assertive digital investigative posture. By applying William A. Gamson's interpretive package model, this study analyzes how each outlet constructs meaning through framing devices and reasoning devices. The objective is not to adjudicate factual validity. It is to examine how language organizes perceptions of legitimacy, secrecy, and authority. The study offers three principal contributions. First, it extends Gamson's framing theory into the domain of transnational elite scandals within Arabic-language media, a context that remains underexplored in existing scholarship. Second, it demonstrates how institutional orientation shapes discursive construction of elite proximity, revealing patterned distinctions between institutional-procedural framing and network-of-influence framing. Third, it deepens framing analysis by integrating symbolic condensation, such as metaphors and visual cues, with structured causal reasoning, including roots, appeals to principle, and consequences. This integration illustrates how interpretive packages operate coherently across textual and visual dimensions (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Rather than treating elite proximity as inherently legitimate or illegitimate, this study conceptualizes legitimacy as discursively produced. When criminal justice failure, geopolitical sensitivity, and digital conspiracy discourse intersect, framing becomes a political act of meaning-making. Media narratives determine whether elite interaction is interpreted as structured governance connectivity or concealed relational mediation. Understanding this process is essential for advancing media discourse analysis and comparative political communication scholarship in the Arab context.

This study is guided by three research questions derived directly from the identified gap (1) How is William A. Gamson's framing model applied in the coverage

of alleged Gulf elite connections in the Jeffrey Epstein case by France 24 Arabic and WatanOnline? (2) What differences emerge in the framing devices and reasoning devices employed by the two outlets? (3) How do these differences reflect institutional orientation and ideological positioning in shaping public perceptions of elite legitimacy and political power? By addressing these questions, the study provides a systematic comparative analysis of media framing in a transnational elite controversy and contributes to broader theoretical discussions on how discourse constructs geopolitical meaning.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using content analysis to examine how Arabic-language media construct political meaning through news discourse rather than to measure phenomena statistically. Qualitative content analysis enables systematic examination of narrative structures, symbolic elements, and discursive patterns embedded in media texts (Anggito, 2018). News articles are treated as socio-political products shaped by institutional interests, ideological orientation, and geopolitical positioning (Scheufele, 1996). The unit of analysis is media text. The study does not involve human participants but analyzes publicly available Arabic-language news articles as documentary sources.

The analytical framework is derived from William A. Gamson's interpretive package model, which conceptualizes media as active agents in constructing meaning (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Gamson distinguishes between framing devices and reasoning devices. Framing devices include metaphors, catchphrases, exemplars, depictions, and visual images, while reasoning devices consist of roots, appeals to principle, and consequences (Gamson, 1989). These categories function as the coding instrument of the study and were operationalized linguistically to ensure systematic identification.

The data consist of two Arabic-language online news articles published in February 2026. The first article was published by France 24 Arabic on 6 February 2026 under the title "ماذا كشفت وثائق وزارة العدل الأمريكية عن علاقة إبستين بالسعودية؟" and is available at <https://f24.my/Bitf>. The second article was published by WatanOnline on 2 February 2026 under the title "شبكة النفوذ الخفية: ماذا تكشف مئات الإيميلات بين الإماراتي سلطان بن سليم وجيفري؟" and is available at <https://www.watanonline.com/2026/02/02/شبكة-النفوذ-الخفية-ماذا-تكشف-مئات-الإيميلات-بين-الإماراتي-سلطان-بن-سليم-وجيفري/>. Both articles were retrieved and archived on 10 February 2026. The selection followed purposive sampling criteria: each article explicitly addresses alleged Gulf elite connections in the Jeffrey Epstein case, contains sufficient textual and visual elements for framing analysis, and represents a distinct institutional orientation. France 24 Arabic operates as an international broadcaster affiliated with France Médias Monde and adheres to formal journalistic standards emphasizing documentation and verification. WatanOnline functions as a digital news platform characterized by a more assertive investigative tone and stronger emphasis on structural critique. Limiting the corpus to two articles allows in-depth comparative analysis of interpretive packages rather than broad quantitative generalization.

Data collection was conducted through systematic documentation. The researcher accessed official websites, downloaded complete original texts, and preserved both textual and visual components in their original Arabic form. Inclusion criteria required full-text availability, identifiable publication dates, and clear narrative focus on alleged Gulf elite connections. Opinion columns and derivative summaries were excluded to maintain genre consistency.

Coding was conducted using a structured matrix derived from Gamson's framing and reasoning devices (Gamson, 1989; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Textual units were

defined as sentences or coherent semantic segments containing symbolic or causal elements related to elite legitimacy, secrecy, or institutional authority. In the first stage, relevant segments were descriptively identified. In the second stage, they were categorized according to the predefined matrix. Metaphors were identified through figurative representations, catchphrases through condensed narrative formulations, exemplars through specific illustrative events, and depictions through evaluative characterizations. Roots were coded when causal explanations were articulated, appeals to principle when normative standards were invoked, and consequences when broader implications were stated. Visual elements were analyzed in terms of composition, setting, and symbolic positioning.

To enhance credibility, coded results were reviewed through peer debriefing with a scholar in media discourse studies. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved by reference to Gamson's conceptual definitions. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles et al. (2014), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Coded segments were organized comparatively to identify dominant interpretive packages. Frames were established when multiple framing and reasoning devices converged around coherent narrative logic. Interpretive conclusions were validated through iterative comparison between empirical findings and theoretical constructs. Because the study relies exclusively on publicly accessible texts, ethical approval for human subjects was not required. This methodological design ensures systematic, transparent, and theoretically grounded examination of framing processes in Arabic-language media discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Framing is a process through which media construct meaning by selecting and emphasizing particular symbolic elements that guide public interpretation (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Rather than merely reporting facts, media organize events into interpretive packages that shape how audiences understand legitimacy, authority, and elite relations. In the coverage of the alleged connections between Gulf elites and Jeffrey Epstein by France 24 (Arabic edition) and WatanOnline, framing determines whether elite interaction is presented as institutional political access or as part of concealed influence networks.

This study applies Gamson's distinction between framing devices and reasoning devices (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson, 1992). The analysis indicates that France 24 predominantly relies on depictions supported by appeals to principle, grounding its narrative in official documents, institutional references, and procedural verification, thereby constructing an institutional-procedural frame. In contrast, WatanOnline is dominated by metaphorical framing and causal reasoning through roots and consequences, portraying elite relations as a structured yet hidden network of influence. The results of the data reduction are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Research Findings from France24 (Arabic Edition)

No	Category	Subcategory	Data
1	Framing Devices	Metaphors	واستهدفت الحملة وقتها أعضاء من العائلة المالكة والنخب المالية، حيث اضطر بعضهم لدفع مليارات الدولارات بعدما قضى عدة أيام في "سجن ذهبي" بفندق ريتز كارلتون بالرياض.
2		Catchphrases	كشفت وثائق نشرتها وزارة العدل الأمريكية أن مراسلا مجهولا طلب من جيفري إبستين مراقبة الاضطرابات السياسية التي وقعت في المملكة العربية السعودية في 2017.
3		Exemplars	وقبل ثمانية أشهر من هذه الأحداث، كان جيفري إبستين يشير وفق موقع "ميدل إيست أي" إلى علاقاته مع ولي العهد في محاولة منه لتعزيز روابطه مع المسؤولين السعوديين.
4		Depictions	لعب إبستين دورا في متابعة الإصلاحات وتحليل التحولات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية

No	Category	Subcategory	Data
			في المملكة
5		Visual Images	صورة ولي العهد السعودي الأمير محمد بن سلمان في إطار رسمي مع ظهور العلم السعودي في الخلفية.
6	Reasoning Devices	Roots	ما أتاح له الوصول إلى أعلى مستويات في الحكومة السعودية وتنظيم لقاءات بين شخصيات دولية وقادة الخليج.
7		Appeals to Principle	"وفق موقع "ميدل إيست أي
8		Consequences	ما أتاح له الوصول إلى أعلى مستويات في الحكومة السعودية

Table 2. Research Findings from WatanOnline

No	Category	Subcategory	Data
1	Framing Devices	Metaphors	ما تكشفه هذه الإيميلات ليس صداقة لطيفة بين رجلين نافذين، بل نظامًا متكاملًا يعمل في الظل.
2		Catchphrases	حين تتجاوز الرسائل تنسيق المواعيد، يظهر نمط واضح: سلطان يطلب، وإبستين يتدخل.
3		Exemplars	في رسالة أخرى، يبدو سلطان متعثرًا في مشروع فندي خاص، فيطلب من إبستين المساعدة في الحصول على قرض بقيمة 125 مليون دولار.
4		Depictions	تكتشف علاقة تتجاوز الصداقة العابرة أو المجاملات البروتوكولية، لتظهر نمطًا متشابكًا من الرعاية، والخدمات المتبادلة، والوساطة السياسية والمالية.
5		Visual Images	صورة جيفري إبستين في مطبخ خاص مع أحد المقربين، في سياق غير رسمي.
6	Reasoning Devices	Roots	يرسل سلطان الرسائل إلى إبستين، طالبًا النصيحة.
7		Appeals to Principle	لا ترد عليهم. هذه عملية نصب.
8		Consequences	وأزمات تُدار بعيدًا عن العلن.

Framing Devices

Framing devices refer to the linguistic and symbolic elements used by media institutions to highlight central ideas and direct audiences toward particular interpretations of reality (Eriyanto, 2012). In politically sensitive cases involving elite networks and transnational controversy, framing devices become crucial because they condense complex relations into accessible symbolic representations. In the coverage of the alleged connections between Saudi elites and Jeffrey Epstein, both France 24 (Arabic edition) and Watanonline rely on symbolic language to structure meaning. However, they do so in markedly different ways. Through metaphors and catchphrases, the two outlets construct distinct interpretive packages concerning power, secrecy, institutional authority, and elite interaction. Rather than merely recounting events, they actively organize the narrative logic that guides public interpretation. The following sections analyze how these framing devices operate within William A. Gamson's model.

Metaphors

Metaphors function as symbolic tools that simplify complex political realities and anchor abstract power relations in concrete imagery. Within Gamson's framing theory, metaphors are not decorative language but central mechanisms that connect political events to broader ideological meanings such as legitimacy, reform, secrecy, or structural control (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). They provide narrative coherence by translating intricate political processes into vivid symbolic forms.

Datum (1) – France24

“واستهدفت الحملة وقتها أعضاء من العائلة المالكة والنخب المالية، حيث اضطر بعضهم لدفع مليارات الدولارات بعدما قضى عدة أيام في "سجن ذهبي" بفندق ريتز كارلتون بالرياض. (France24, 2026).”

Translation:

“The campaign targeted members of the royal family and financial elites, some of whom were forced to pay billions of dollars after spending several days in a ‘golden prison’ at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Riyadh.”

The metaphor “سجن ذهبي” or “golden prison” juxtaposes luxury and confinement. It condenses a politically delicate anti-corruption purge into a single symbolic image. The Ritz-Carlton, globally recognized as a symbol of wealth and exclusivity, is reframed as a site of restriction and discipline. This metaphor captures the paradox of elite accountability conducted within privileged conditions.

In Gamsonian terms, this expression organizes the narrative into a procedural-political interpretive package. Rather than suggesting secret detention or conspiracy, France24 situates the episode within a formal process of political restructuring. The metaphor acknowledges coercion while maintaining institutional framing. The image does not imply systemic illegitimacy; instead, it signals regulated authority and managed elite discipline. Epstein’s alleged connections therefore appear embedded in broader political transformation rather than in clandestine manipulation. The metaphor stabilizes the narrative by contextualizing elite constraint within reform discourse.

Datum (2) – Watanonline

“ما تكشفه هذه الإيميلات ليس صداقة لطيفة بين رجلين نافذين، بل نظامًا متكاملًا يعمل في الظل.” (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

“What these emails reveal is not a friendly relationship between two influential men, but an integrated system operating in the shadows.”

The metaphor “نظامًا متكاملًا يعمل في الظل” or “an integrated system operating in the shadows” constructs a sharply different interpretive frame. The phrase “operating in the shadows” evokes secrecy, concealment, and covert coordination. Unlike France24’s reform-oriented imagery, Watanonline shifts attention to hidden structure and systemic opacity.

Within Gamson’s framework, this metaphor transforms scattered email exchanges into evidence of an organized clandestine system. The term “system” suggests continuity and structure, while “in the shadows” implies illegitimacy and invisibility. Together, they create a conspiratorial-expository interpretive package. Elite interaction is framed not as incidental or procedural but as structurally embedded in covert influence networks.

Catchphrases

Catchphrases are concise and memorable expressions that encapsulate the essence of a news frame. In Gamson’s framework, they operate as symbolic condensation devices that guide audience interpretation while signaling the media outlet’s ideological stance (Gamson, 1992). By reducing complex political narratives to repeatable formulas, catchphrases stabilize particular readings of events.

Datum (3) – France24

“كشفت وثائق نشرتها وزارة العدل الأمريكية أن مراسلا مجهولا طلب من جيفري إبستين مراقبة الاضطرابات السياسية التي وقعت في المملكة العربية السعودية في 2017.” (France24, 2026).

Translation:

“Documents published by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed that an anonymous correspondent asked Jeffrey Epstein to monitor the political unrest that occurred in Saudi Arabia in 2017.”

The phrase “كشفت وثائق نشرتها وزارة العدل الأمريكية” or “Documents published by the U.S. Department of Justice revealed” functions as a legitimizing catchphrase. It foregrounds institutional authority and documentary verification. By emphasizing official disclosure, France24 anchors the narrative in legal documentation rather than speculation.

Within Gamson’s perspective, this catchphrase directs interpretation toward institutional credibility. It frames the report as evidence-based and procedurally grounded. The ideological emphasis lies in transparency and formal sourcing. Epstein’s alleged involvement is presented within a documentary-legal interpretive package,

minimizing sensationalism and reinforcing a cautious journalistic posture (Gamson, 1992).

Datum (4) – Watanonline

“حين تتجاوز الرسائل تنسيق المواعيد، يظهر نمط واضح: سلطان يطلب، وإبستين يتدخل.” (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

“When the emails move beyond merely scheduling meetings, a clear pattern emerges: Sultan requests, and Epstein intervenes.”

Watanonline employs a rhythmic parallel construction: “سلطان يطلب، وإبستين يتدخل” or “Sultan requests, and Epstein intervenes.” This formula condenses extensive correspondence into a simplified relational pattern. The repetition suggests continuity and structured coordination.

Within Gamson’s framework, this catchphrase functions as an interpretive shortcut. It shifts focus from documentation to relational dynamics and influence. The symmetrical phrasing implies a recurring mechanism of mediation and brokerage. Instead of highlighting institutional authority, it foregrounds power exchange. The interpretive package centers on systemic influence and networked intervention (Gamson, 1992).

Exemplars

Exemplars are concrete events or specific episodes used by media to clarify broader issues. Through exemplars, abstract notions such as elite networking, political access, and financial mediation become tangible, thereby reinforcing the interpretive frame constructed by the outlet (Gamson, 1992). In reporting on the alleged connections between Saudi elites and Jeffrey Epstein, both France 24 (Arabic edition) and Watanonline rely on specific incidents to substantiate their framing strategies, yet they mobilize these examples in distinct ways.

Datum (5) – France24

“وقبل ثمانية أشهر من هذه الأحداث، كان جيفري إبستين يشير وفق موقع “ميدل إيست آي” إلى علاقاته مع ولي العهد في محاولة منه لتعزيز روابطه مع المسؤولين السعوديين.” (France24, 2026).

Translation:

“Eight months before these events, Jeffrey Epstein referred, according to the Middle East Eye website, to his relationship with the Crown Prince in an attempt to strengthen his ties with Saudi officials.”

Datum (5) demonstrates how France24 uses a concrete episode to illustrate strategic networking. The emphasis lies on Epstein’s reference to his ties with the Crown Prince as reputational leverage. Importantly, the outlet explicitly cites “ميدل إيست آي” (Middle East Eye), maintaining journalistic caution and avoiding broad generalization. This attribution signals procedural reporting rather than speculative inference.

Within Gamson’s framework, this exemplar supports a procedural-access interpretive package (Gamson, 1992). The relationship is framed as symbolic proximity to power rather than as proof of coordinated wrongdoing. The episode suggests calculated positioning within elite circles, highlighting reputational capital rather than systemic conspiracy. Epstein appears as an actor navigating networks through claimed associations. Thus, France24 constructs a narrative of strategic access embedded within political processes rather than clandestine coordination.

Datum (6) – Watanonline

“في رسالة أخرى، يبدو سلطان متعثراً في مشروع فندقى خاص، فيطلب من إبستين المساعدة في الحصول على قرض بقيمة 125 مليون دولار.” (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

“In another email, Sultan appears to be struggling with a private hotel project and asks Epstein for assistance in obtaining a loan of 125 million dollars.”

In contrast, Watanonline presents a financially concrete and high-stakes example. The explicit mention of a 125 million dollar loan intensifies the narrative’s material

weight. Unlike France24's symbolic networking, this exemplar illustrates direct financial mediation. According to Gamson's theory, exemplars materialize abstract frames into vivid instances (Gamson, 1992). Here, the substantial monetary figure reinforces a power brokerage frame. Epstein is not merely associated with influence; he is portrayed as facilitating major financial transactions. The specificity of the sum strengthens the perception of structured coordination and elite dependency. Financial magnitude transforms relational proximity into operational involvement.

Depictions

In Gamson's framing model, depictions shape audience perception through evaluative portrayals of actors and events (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Language choices assign functional and moral roles, embedding ideological meaning within narrative representation. In coverage of the alleged connections between Saudi elites and Jeffrey Epstein, France 24 (Arabic edition) and Watanonline construct contrasting depictions through distinct evaluative tones.

Datum (7) – France24

“لعب إبستين دورا في متابعة الإصلاحات وتحليل التحولات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية في المملكة.” (France24, 2026).

Translation:

“Epstein played a role in monitoring reforms and analyzing social and economic transformations in the kingdom.”

France24 depicts Epstein as participating in reform monitoring and socio-economic analysis. The phrase “لعب دورا” (played a role) carries a functional connotation, suggesting engagement within structured political processes. The reference to “تحليل التحولات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية” (analyzing social and economic transformations) situates him within an intellectual or advisory capacity.

This depiction constructs Epstein as a policy observer rather than solely as a convicted offender. Within Gamson's framework, such evaluative language supports a procedural-intellectual interpretive package (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The emphasis lies on analytical participation rather than clandestine involvement. By foregrounding reform discourse, France24 moderates the moral weight associated with Epstein's criminal history and aligns his presence with institutional political dynamics.

Datum (8) – Watanonline

“تتكشف علاقة تتجاوز الصداقة العابرة أو المجاملات البروتوكولية، ل تظهر نمطا متشابكا من الرعاية، والخدمات المتبادلة، والوساطة السياسية والمالية.” (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

“A relationship emerges that goes beyond casual friendship or protocol courtesies, revealing an intertwined pattern of patronage, mutual services, and political and financial mediation.”

Watanonline adopts explicitly evaluative language. The relationship is described as exceeding superficial interaction and revealing an “intertwined pattern” of patronage and mediation. Terms such as “نمط متشابك” (intertwined pattern) and “الوساطة السياسية والمالية” (political and financial mediation) imply systemic organization rather than incidental contact.

Within Gamson's theory, this depiction supports a network-of-patronage interpretive package (Gamson, 1992). The actors are embedded within a web of reciprocal services and brokerage. The evaluative tone introduces moral and structural implications, suggesting coordinated influence rather than advisory proximity. The narrative moves from functional participation to systemic interdependence.

Visual Images

In William A. Gamson's framing model, visual images operate as powerful framing devices because they convey symbolic meaning instantly and generate emotional responses more quickly than text (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Through composition, posture, attire, facial expression, and setting, media outlets shape

how political actors are perceived and reinforce the interpretive package constructed in the narrative.

Reasoning Device

In Gamson's framing theory, reasoning devices function as mechanisms that elaborate and rationalize issues by providing interpretive explanations (Gamson, 1992; Yan, 2020). They help audiences understand why events occur, who is responsible, and what broader values or implications are attached to them. In reporting on the alleged connections between Saudi elites and Jeffrey Epstein, France 24 (Arabic edition) and Watanonline employ reasoning devices in different ways, constructing distinct causal logics and moral interpretations.

Roots

Within Gamson's framework, roots identify the underlying causes or structural conditions that explain an event (Gamson, 1992; Gawerc & Meyer, 2021). They guide audiences toward specific understandings of responsibility and systemic context.

Datum (9) – France24

"ما أتاح له الوصول إلى أعلى مستويات في الحكومة السعودية وتنظيم لقاءات بين شخصيات دولية وقادة الخليج . , France24, 2026)"

Translation:

"This allowed him to access the highest levels of the Saudi government and to organize meetings between international figures and Gulf leaders."

In Datum (9), France24 frames elite access as the root of influence. The phrase "الوصول إلى أعلى مستويات في الحكومة السعودية" positions proximity to authority as the enabling condition. Influence is explained through structured political connectivity rather than covert coordination.

Within Gamson's reasoning model, access itself becomes the causal mechanism (Gamson, 1992). The ability to arrange meetings between international actors and Gulf leaders suggests brokerage within formal institutional spaces. Thus, the interpretive package remains procedural and state-centered. Epstein's influence appears embedded in elite political networks rather than rooted in hidden manipulation. Readers are guided to interpret the relationship as a function of strategic proximity to authority.

Datum (10) – Watanonline

"يرسل سلطان الرسائل إلى إبستين، طالبًا النصيحة. (WatanOnline, 2026)"

Translation:

"Sultan sends the emails to Epstein, seeking advice."

Watanonline constructs a different root. The recurring act of seeking advice establishes a pattern of consultation and relational dependence. Influence operates because one actor repeatedly turns to another for guidance. Roots highlight patterns that render events structured rather than incidental (Gamson, 1992). Here, repeated consultation becomes the structural explanation. Epstein is framed as an advisory node within elite decision-making processes. The root lies in sustained interpersonal reliance, reinforcing a network-of-influence interpretive package. Causality is relational rather than institutional.

Appeals to Principle

Appeals to principle connect events to normative values such as legitimacy, transparency, or prudence (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Through this device, media frame actions as justified, ethical, or aligned with recognized standards.

Datum (11) – France24

"وفق موقع "ميدل إيست آي". (France24, 2026)"

Translation:

"According to the Middle East Eye website."

Although brief, this attribution reflects an appeal to journalistic verification. By citing an external source, France24 invokes the principle of transparency and cross-referencing. In Gamson's terms, appeals to principle legitimize interpretive claims (Gamson, 1992). The explicit reference to a recognized outlet frames the narrative as evidence-based rather than speculative. This reinforces the institutional-procedural interpretive package by foregrounding accountability and credibility. Readers are encouraged to view the report as grounded in professional standards of verification.

Datum (12) – Watanonline

"لا ترد عليهم. هذه عملية نصب." (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

"Do not respond to them. This is a scam."

Watanonline appeals to a different normative principle: crisis management and reputational protection. The directive not to respond frames the situation as requiring strategic caution. From a Gamsonian perspective, this appeal constructs a moral logic of defensive prudence (Gamson, 1992). The emphasis lies on safeguarding against manipulation. The narrative presents protective action as rational and necessary. Rather than highlighting institutional transparency, the appeal underscores legal caution and strategic containment.

Consequences

Consequences highlight the effects or implications of events, guiding audiences toward understanding broader significance (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson, 1992). By emphasizing outcomes, media shape perceptions of impact.

Datum (13) – France24

"ما أتاح له الوصول إلى أعلى مستويات في الحكومة السعودية." (France24, 2026).

Translation:

"This enabled him to gain access to the highest levels of the Saudi government."

France24 stresses institutional access as the key consequence. The focus lies on elevated connectivity within governance structures rather than reputational fallout. Within Gamson's framework, consequences link actions to systemic implications (Gamson, 1992). Here, proximity results in enhanced political reach. The interpretive package remains state-centered. Influence is portrayed as operating within formal hierarchies. The audience is directed to see the relationship through structured elite governance.

Datum (14) – Watanonline

"وأزمات تُدار بعيداً عن العلن." (WatanOnline, 2026).

Translation:

"And crises are managed away from public view."

Watanonline foregrounds opacity as the primary consequence. The phrase implies private containment and concealed management. Consequences structure meaning by highlighting broader effects (Gamson, 1992). Here, the effect is systemic secrecy. The narrative suggests that elite networks can handle crises internally without public scrutiny. This reinforces a hidden-power interpretive package centered on controlled visibility and reputational containment.

Discussion

This study reveals a significant finding: media framing of transnational elite scandals in Arabic-language outlets is structurally patterned by institutional orientation, resulting in systematically divergent interpretive packages even when covering identical documentary sources. The divergence between France24 Arabic and WatanOnline is not stylistic variation but reflects deeper structural logics of media ideology, professional norms, and geopolitical positioning. Consistent with Gamson's framing theory, interpretive packages are organized systems of meaning constructed through symbolic

condensation rather than incidental narrative difference (Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

At the level of framing devices, metaphors function as core ideological anchors. Gamson & Modigliani (1989) argue that metaphors embed interpretive direction by translating abstract political realities into symbolic imagery. France24's reference to the "golden prison" situates elite discipline within structured reform, maintaining institutional legitimacy through paradoxical imagery that combines luxury and confinement. In contrast, WatanOnline's metaphor of a "system operating in the shadows" foregrounds secrecy and hidden coordination. These metaphors do not merely decorate the narrative; they organize the central interpretive direction through which elite proximity is understood. France24 emphasizes regulated institutional authority, whereas WatanOnline foregrounds systemic opacity.

Catchphrases further stabilize this divergence. As Gamson & Modigliani (1989) note, catchphrases condense ideological stance into repeatable narrative formulas. France24 privileges documentary attribution and legal authority, guiding readers toward procedural interpretation grounded in verification. WatanOnline's relational formulation, structured around repeated requests and interventions, frames elite interaction as patterned brokerage. These symbolic condensation mechanisms direct attention toward either institutional legitimacy or structural influence, thereby stabilizing competing interpretive packages (Gamson, 1992).

Exemplars substantiate these frames by grounding abstraction in concrete episodes. Gamson (1992) emphasizes that exemplars reinforce interpretive logic rather than simply illustrate events. France24 highlights symbolic access and reputational positioning within formal governance structures. WatanOnline foregrounds financial mediation, advisory intervention, and crisis management. Thus, exemplars function ideologically by normalizing access in one outlet and problematizing relational dependency in the other.

Depictions assign functional and moral roles within each narrative (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). France24 portrays Epstein as analytically embedded within reform discourse, moderating perceptions of clandestine activity. WatanOnline depicts relationships as structured patronage and systemic mediation. Through evaluative language, France24 reduces the appearance of covert manipulation, while WatanOnline amplifies interconnected elite dependency. Visual framing reinforces this distinction. Official imagery in France24 stabilizes authority and sovereign continuity, consistent with research on symbolic legitimation in media discourse (Akbar & Kurnia, 2024). WatanOnline's emphasis on informal and private settings cultivates perceptions of concealed coordination, echoing findings in digital media studies on relational framing (Hapsari & Tambunan, 2024). Visuals therefore amplify interpretive direction rather than merely illustrate content (Eriyanto, 2012; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Reasoning devices further differentiate the interpretive packages. Roots identify enabling conditions that structure causal explanation (Gamson, 1992; Gawerc & Meyer, 2021). France24 foregrounds institutional access as the source of influence, embedding elite proximity within structured governance. WatanOnline emphasizes relational dependency as the origin of influence. These divergent causal logics shape audience interpretation of legitimacy and accountability, paralleling patterns observed in crisis reporting research (Sakti & Sinduwiatmo, 2023).

Appeals to principle anchor narratives in normative standards (Gamson, 1992). France24 appeals to verification and documentary transparency, reinforcing procedural legitimacy. WatanOnline appeals to prudence and crisis containment, framing elite behavior as strategic management. As studies on radicalism framing demonstrate, evaluative emphasis intensifies perceptions of systemic risk (Zamroni et al., 2021), while

symbolic condensation in digital discourse can escalate interpretive intensity (Amir et al., 2023). Although WatanOnline does not adopt inflammatory rhetoric, its emphasis on secrecy aligns with structural suspicion. Consequences complete the interpretive package by linking symbolic and causal logic. France24 highlights legitimized institutional engagement, whereas WatanOnline foregrounds concealed crisis management (Gamson, 1992).

These findings carry broader implications for Arab media systems. They suggest that institutional affiliation significantly shapes how transnational scandals are domesticated within regional discourse. International broadcasters embedded in professionalized norms emphasize verification, diplomatic positioning, and institutional continuity. Digital investigative platforms, operating outside state-affiliated structures, are more likely to foreground relational exposure and structural causality. This pattern aligns with comparative research demonstrating that institutional background shapes representations of legitimacy and crisis (Arrosyid et al., 2021; Marlene & Kho, 2024; Pamungkas et al., 2024; Septiani et al., 2024). The present study extends this insight into the domain of transnational elite scandals, where geopolitical sensitivity amplifies the stakes of framing.

This study empirically reinforces Gamson's theoretical proposition that framing devices and reasoning devices operate coherently across symbolic and causal levels (Gamson, 1992; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). The central intellectual insight is that media framing of transnational elite controversy follows structured institutional logics that shape how legitimacy, secrecy, and authority are publicly interpreted. France24 Arabic constructs legitimacy through procedural verification and sovereign symbolism, whereas WatanOnline constructs opacity through relational dependency and systemic mediation. Framing thus functions not as stylistic variation but as a political act of meaning-making that organizes how elite power is understood within the Arab public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates the importance of framing analysis in understanding how transnational elite controversies are constructed within Arab media discourse. In cases such as the alleged Gulf connections surrounding Jeffrey Epstein, news reporting does not merely transmit information; it actively organizes meaning through symbolic selection, causal explanation, and normative positioning. When criminal justice failure, global political sensitivity, and digital conspiracy discourse intersect, framing becomes central to how legitimacy, secrecy, and institutional authority are publicly interpreted.

Regarding the first research question, the study finds that Gamson's framing model is clearly observable in both outlets, but operationalized differently. France24 Arabic constructs an institutional-procedural interpretive package, emphasizing official documentation, structured political access, and state-centered legitimacy. In contrast, WatanOnline builds a network-of-influence interpretive package, foregrounding secrecy, relational dependency, systemic mediation, and private crisis management. Concerning the second research question, significant differences emerge in the use of framing and reasoning devices. France24 employs legitimizing catchphrases, cautious source attribution, and formal visual imagery to stabilize the narrative within institutional authority. Its reasoning devices highlight elite access as a structural outcome.

With respect to the third research question, these differences reflect each outlet's institutional orientation and ideological positioning. France24, as an international broadcaster with formal journalistic standards, frames the controversy within institutional governance and documentary credibility. WatanOnline, adopting a more investigative and assertive tone, frames the same issue as indicative of hidden networks

and systemic opacity. Consequently, public perception of elite legitimacy is shaped either as structured political connectivity within formal institutions or as covert influence embedded in private relational networks.

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