

RESEARCH PAPER

Turning sportswashing against sportswashers: an unconventional perspective

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Submission date: 8 July 2024; Acceptance date: 12 February 2025; Publication date: 2 July 2025

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ABSTRACT

We examine how sportswashing can be transformed into an opportunity to advance the morally charged cause(s) that prompted its use. After characterizing sportswashing through a literature review, we develop conceptual arguments that show how sportswashing can bring positive change. We employ a two-dimensional framework, incorporating control over media narratives and the capacity for action, to map the extent to which cause promoters can leverage sportswashing situations. We propose three rationales through which sportswashing can advance the cause agenda: (i) leveraging media coverage of the sportswashed event to raise awareness of the cause, (ii) transforming key stakeholders of the sportswashed event into cause promoters, and (iii) leveraging the sportswashing experience to raise future standards. We also provide anecdotal evidence to support our rationale. Rather than accepting sportswashing at face value, promoters of various causes can innovate and advance their agendas by viewing these events as opportunities to reframe sportswashing and subvert the original intent of the sportswashers. These promoters need to be equipped and trained to enhance their abilities in managing sportswashing. Our study also serves as a catalyst for future research and discussion on the potential for repurposing sportswashing.

KEYWORDS

sportswashing, sportswashers, strategy, sport policy, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, football

DOI: 10.13169/Prometheus.40.3.0003

Introduction

If sport washing is going to increase my GDP by way of 1%, then I will continue doing sport washing. (Mohammed bin Salman, Crown prince of Saudi Arabia as quoted in MacInnes, 2023)

Sports-related events are facing accusations of serving the interests of states, corporations and individuals seeking to improve a tainted image (Bergkvist and Skeiseid, 2024). While they generate huge returns, through increased tourism and media coverage, for instance, sports-related events can also be a means of reputation enhancing or laundering. For example, a critical 2021 report revealed

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more than 250 agreements between polluting companies and major sports teams and organizations (Taylor, 2021; Canniford and Hill, 2022). These arrangements can be referred to as ‘sportswashing’, a term for associating a sporting event or investment (e.g., hosting a major competition or owning/sponsoring a club) with an entity accused of human rights abuses or environmental degradation. More precisely, sportswashing can be defined as: ‘the practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club (such as Newcastle United, owned by Saudi Arabia) to subvert the way that others attend to a moral violation for which the sportswashing agent is responsible’ (Fruh *et al.*, 2023, p.101).

Sportswashing is a major issue for sport stakeholders and several academics have called for more attention to be paid to the phenomenon (e.g., Chadwick, 2018; Skey, 2023; Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024). Although there is increasing research to better delineate, and study the harmful consequences of sportswashing (e.g., Leeson, 2019; Boykoff, 2022; Fruh *et al.*, 2023; Skey, 2023), a knowledge gap remains. An important caveat: we do not advocate sportswashing, but encourage sport stakeholders to consider this *a priori* detrimental situation from a different perspective.¹ In other words, we address the following research question: How can the capacity of cause promoters to leverage sportswashing situations be systematically mapped, and through which strategic mechanisms can these situations be transformed into cause-advancing opportunities? These promoters typically include activists, NGOs and countries actively advocating specific causes. These cause promoters and other involuntary accomplices of sportswashing may benefit from taking action, rather than remaining mere victims or witnesses. This oversimplification is convenient but does not do justice to dynamics that are frequently more nuanced and complex.

As a preliminary concern, one might question why it is important for cause promoters to make better use of sportswashing situations and, even more critically, whether pursuing such an agenda is morally defensible. At first glance, the importance of cause promoters effectively utilizing sportswashing situations lies in the potential to redirect the narratives surrounding these events. While some authors, such as Fruh *et al.* (2023), argue for resisting sportswashing, it is imperative to acknowledge that merely opposing it does not address the underlying dynamics at play. By understanding and strategically engaging with these situations, cause promoters can leverage the visibility of major sporting events to highlight critical social issues, advocate change and mobilize public sentiment against unethical practices. Moreover, the question of moral defensibility is a complex one, and seeking to engage with sportswashing does not imply an endorsement of the practices involved. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of sport’s unique position as a platform for dialogue and activism. Historical examples demonstrate that sports can serve as a catalyst for social change, such as Nelson Mandela’s use of rugby to foster national unity in post-apartheid South Africa (see e.g., Höglund and Sundberg, 2008). Consequently, while the agenda may appear controversial, it can be reframed as a chance to reveal and confront the very injustices that sportswashing aims to conceal.

In the following section, we describe the methods used to write this conceptual contribution. Then we overview the literature to characterize sportswashing and show that the strategic use of sportswashing by cause promoters has been overlooked. We then utilize a two-dimensional framework encompassing both the control over media narratives and the capacity for action to map the extent to which cause promoters can leverage sportswashing situations. We identify three rationales by which sportswashing situations can be exploited to advance the causes they attempt to conceal. Finally, we offer implications that can inform various stakeholders to take stock and influence the process in cause-serving directions.

¹ This perspective includes a multitude of often marginalized communities and social causes. Grouping them into a broad category does not do justice to the diverse communities affected. However, it allows the advancement of understanding.

Methods

For many scholars, writing conceptual papers presents a unique challenge when there is no standardized template. At the same time, there is a need for conceptual contributions that can raise significant issues and open groundbreaking research directions (MacInnis, 2011; Belk *et al.*, 2019). Unlike empirical research, conceptual papers ‘take a problem-focused approach and address the what’s new question thoroughly’ (Gilson and Goldberg, 2015, p.128). These papers aim to bridge existing theories in innovative ways, link work across disciplines, offer multi-level insights and broaden the scope of our thinking. MacInnis (2016) argues that successful conceptual contributions should achieve four key objectives: (i) introducing a new big idea or provocative perspective, (ii) raising and addressing fundamental questions related to the idea, (iii) maintaining conceptual clarity and logical coherence and (iv) employing a range of conceptual thinking skills to unpack the ideas under consideration.

Beyond the absence of conventional empirical data and analysis, our contribution builds on existing literature to identify mechanisms through which sportswashing can be leveraged. It employs coherent and compelling logic to enhance our understanding of how to repurpose sportswashing scenarios (Vargo and Koskela-Huotari, 2020). By elucidating how sportswashing can be turned against the sportswashers to advance important causes, we aim to uncover surprising implications.

A comprehensive review of the academic literature was conducted to delineate the phenomenon of sportswashing and identify illustrative examples. More specifically, we conducted several Web of Science (WoS) and Google Scholar searches to identify relevant scholarly contributions. A WoS search was conducted using to identify articles containing the term ‘sportswashing’ in their title, abstract or keywords. The results of the search were limited to articles published between 1990 and 2024.² Thirty-eight articles were identified for further analysis. To improve accuracy, ensure a comprehensive coverage and reduce the risk of publication bias, we also performed a title-based search on Google Scholar (see, e.g., Martín-Martín *et al.*, 2018). The search engine returned 177 results. After applying inclusion criteria, only peer-reviewed academic papers published in English or French were retained. Book chapters, dissertations, theses and other documents with unverifiable academic credibility were excluded. This process yielded 41 papers, of which 26 overlapped with the Web of Science (WoS) search results. Subsequently, we reviewed each relevant paper individually to ascertain its pertinence to the research topic and to identify the arguments, reasoning and examples employed. This revealed a significant problem in using ‘sportswashing’ as a tool for addressing the very issues that initially necessitated its use. Consequently, we conducted an additional search utilizing several variations of keywords such as ‘beneficial sportswashing’ or ‘benefits of sportswashing’. This search confirmed the scarcity of sources addressing the potential use of sportswashing against sportswashers, with the notable exception of the contribution by Gerschewski *et al.* (2024). Additionally, we employed analytical reasoning to identify arguments that could elucidate how sportswashing can be used to bring about positive change. Accordingly, we identified three main rationales by which sportswashing can bring good news (see Glavas *et al.*, 2023 for a similar methodology).

Additionally, we conducted a search of non-academic literature (e.g., newspapers, blogs) on Google to gather illustrative examples, expert opinions, and anecdotal evidence to support our conceptual arguments and provide further details on examples. While this diverse supporting evidence is not necessarily representative, they were selected based on at least one of the two following criteria: (1) illustrating a mechanism by which sportswashing can lead to positive outcomes and (2) providing key elements addressing the how issue to achieve the potential benefits of sportswashing (see Table 2 below). This unique perspective has the potential to generate significant advances,

² The earliest documented use of the term ‘sportswashing’ is from 2015, when Gulnara Akhundova, a human rights campaigner, criticized the European Games being held in Baku, Azerbaijan (Skey, 2022). As a precaution, and given the range of available years on WoS, a safety margin of 15 years was applied to ensure that no early mentions of this term were overlooked.

particularly when focused on addressing the what, why and how questions, rather than simply how much or how often (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; see also Frey, 2021).

Characterizing sportswashing

Although the term has been coined in the last decades, sportswashing has a long history. In circa AD 100, Juvenal, the Roman poet, coined the famous ‘Give them bread and circuses and they will never revolt’ to emphasize how Roman emperors used food and entertainment (like chariot races and gladiator fights) to distract from their failings (Haththotuwa, 2022). The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin were used by the Nazi regime to showcase its capacity to organize a major international event and improve its image (Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024; Skey, 2023). According to Smith (2007), the tobacco industry attempted to divert attention from health concerns by using American baseball stars, such as Babe Ruth or Joe DiMaggio (see several recent examples in Canniford and Hill, 2022). According to Zidan (2022; see also Fruh *et al.*, 2023), 2022 was a significant year for sportswashing. Indeed, several 2022 events, such as the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the Winter Olympics in China and the LIV Golf tournament in Saudi Arabia, were accused of sportswashing. Common to all these is that different entities (e.g., states, political regimes, corporations) are suspected of using sport to improve their image. A prime example of this phenomenon is the Winter Olympics, held in Sochi, Russia, in 2014, which were widely criticized for sportswashing (Boykoff, 2022). With this event, the Russian government aimed to project a narrative of national pride and global legitimacy and enhance its international image amid serious human rights violations, political repression and a state-sponsored doping scandal.

In the same vein, several recent events have led to an increase in sportswashing. For instance, Skey (2023) accuses the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund (PIF) and its acquisition of the Newcastle United Football Club in 2021. Bubel (2023) also used the sportswashing metaphor when Saudi Arabia began hiring top footballers, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar. These signings are suspected to divert attention from the Kingdom’s human rights abuses. Critics argue that these investments in sports are not solely a means of enhancing the nation’s image but are also part of a broader strategy to assert global influence and prestige, as evidenced by the lavish contracts offered to these athletes. This approach aims to reshape perceptions of Saudi Arabia, portraying it as a modern and progressive nation, despite its controversial domestic policies (Bubel, 2023; Szymanski and *Conversation*, 2023). Sportswashing strategies can be placed into two categories: one-off event-based (such as autocratic states hosting major international sports events) and longer term investment-based (such as state actors purchasing sports clubs and teams) (Kearns *et al.*, 2024).

We regard moral transgressions as situations in which well-accepted moral principles and values are disregarded. Such situations may include human rights abuses, censorship, corruption and political repression. These moral transgressions can occur within the domain of sports (e.g., doping scandals, corruption) or in domains that are not inherently related to sports, such as human rights abuses and censorship. It is imperative to acknowledge the complexity and variability of moral standards across diverse cultural and societal contexts, which can result in divergent perceptions of identical situations. What is regarded as morally questionable in one cultural context may not carry the same weight in another, sometimes reflecting a divergence between Western-centric ethical frameworks and more universal moral principles.

By providing specific instances of what constitutes morally dubious situations, we can illustrate the mechanisms of sportswashing. For example, the FIFA World Cup in Qatar faced considerable criticism as a result of the treatment of migrant workers and the country’s human rights record (see, e.g., Dubinsky, 2024). Another case is the Winter Olympics in China, which was the subject of criticism because of allegations of human rights abuses against Uyghur Muslims and the suppression of political dissent (Edelman, 2024). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has been accused of prioritizing profit and prestige over ethical considerations, effectively washing away these moral dilemmas under the guise of promoting international unity and athletic excellence. By detailing these

allegations and their implications, we offer a picture of the issues being washed, thereby enriching the discussion around sportswashing and its influence on public perception and accountability.

Sportswashing is derived from ‘whitewashing’. The latter ‘denotes a general practice of casting something or someone in a favorable light despite the presence of some dubious features, marks against them that are glossed over in the whitewash’ (Fruh *et al.*, 2023, p.102). Other well-known derivatives are greenwashing, defined as ‘the misleading of stakeholders about environmental achievements’ (Glavas *et al.*, 2023, p.1) and ‘redwashing’ as the use of indigenous traditions, symbols and narratives to enhance the image, interests, political agendas of various actors, such as corporations or NGOs (e.g., Millington *et al.*, 2019, in the context of sport management). Following Fruh *et al.* (2023), sportswashing may be considered equivalent to whitewashing, greenwashing, or redwashing, as it allows organizations and nations to deflect the attention of the large, often international, sports audiences away from moral violations. While there is an analogy between greenwashing and sportswashing, it is important to stress a fundamental difference. In greenwashing, the greenwasher often uses misleading or false environmental claims to improve its environmental image while in sportswashing, the sportswasher uses authentic and real sport situations to enhance its image in matters that are usually unrelated to sport (e.g., rights of minorities, pollution).

The specific forms of washing – such as whitewashing, greenwashing, and redwashing – operate within distinct contexts and focus on different issues. Greenwashing, for instance, refers to the practice of companies or organizations exaggerating or fabricating their environmental efforts to appeal to eco-conscious consumers. This is often achieved by using vague claims or misleading imagery to mask unsustainable practices (Glavas *et al.*, 2023). In contrast, sportswashing does not entail deception. Rather, it involves the utilization of authentic sports events or sponsorships by governments or organizations with poor records on sensitive issues to deflect attention from their controversial actions. For instance, a nation may host a major sporting event to enhance its global reputation while downplaying issues such as political repression or labour abuses. The strategy utilizes the genuine popularity and emotional appeal of sports to redirect public attention. A critical distinction lies in the nature of the deception and the underlying motivations. Sportswashing aims to enhance or rehabilitate the image of entities involved in significant ethical violations by associating them with the positive attributes of sportsmanship and international camaraderie. In contrast, greenwashing emphasizes environmental claims and sustainability. Both tactics exploit public sentiment, but they do so in ways that reflect their unique contexts.

Sportswashing is often associated with soft power (Ettinger, 2023; Davis *et al.*, 2025). Soft power ‘rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others’ (Nye, 2004, p.5) and appear (more) attractive to the rest of the world or to a subset of potential targets, through non-coercive means, such as culture or diplomacy, instead of through military force or economic coercion. The connection between soft power and sportswashing lies in the leveraging of sports as a means of projecting a positive image or influence. Sportswashing allows the sportswashers to exercise soft power by shaping perceptions and deflecting attention away from their misdeeds. Through investments in sports markets or sponsorship of mega sport events (Taylor *et al.*, 2023), entities can acquire or enhance their soft power by associating themselves with such positive values as teamwork, athleticism and fair play. Analysing sportswashing requires examining the power relations among the sportswasher, sports organizations/events they engage with and the target audience whose opinions they seek to influence (Bergkvist and Skeiseid, 2024).³ Furthermore, sportswashing is used to divert attention from controversial or ethically dubious situations, thereby leveraging the positive image associated with sports to mitigate criticism or scrutiny. Nevertheless, sportswashing can backfire (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015, 2018; Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024). For any state that seeks to employ soft power through sports, soft disempowerment may arise. This occurs when, for example,

³ Sportswashing as a form of soft power can target different audiences related to sport (e.g., fans, tele-spectators, teams, key players, sport institutions) or not (e.g., citizens, voters, deciders, politicians, activists, companies). Examining how sportswashing is adapted to these different audiences is beyond the scope of our contribution.

a state's soft power initiatives attract undesirable attention and are, consequently, potentially discrediting (in)actions (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015, 2018).

Plans of the government of Thailand to expand Thai restaurants worldwide is a good example of a successful soft power initiative (Suntikul, 2019). Dubner (2022) goes even further and argues that, because of the positive image of Thai restaurants, few people seem to be aware that Thailand is a repressive society characterized by military coups and a lack of genuine and fair elections. This example shows that states may have soft power expertise to reduce the reputational impact of their wrongdoings and increase their influence and legitimacy. This goal can be achieved by organizing sporting events (e.g., Freeman, 2012; Attali, 2016; Grix and Brannagan, 2016; Koch, 2018).

Sportswashing falls within the scope of scholarly works on sport diplomacy (see Postlethwaite *et al.*, 2023) and the geopolitical economy of sport defined as 'the way in which nations, states and other entities engage in, with, or through sport for geographic and politico-economic reasons in order to build and exert power, and secure strategic advantages' (Chadwick, 2022, p.693). However, as Chadwick (2018) argues, the definition of sportswashing is not entirely clear. Using several definitions (see Table 1), we characterize sportswashing as a process and along different dimensions: (1) its actors, (2) its goals, (3) its possible paths, (4) its mechanisms and (5) its consequences.

The sportswashing actors

A sportswashing situation often involves at least five actors. While the various actors involved in sportswashing are well-delineated, there can be strong power imbalances among them. First, there is a sportswasher that suffers from an image deficit or that has another need, such as reinforcing national unity and pride (see, e.g., Boykoff, 2022), but also has significant resources (e.g., money, power) that may attract those interested in serving the sportswashing goal.

Second, sportswashers have targets, which may include other countries, consumers or even domestic citizens. Sportswashers aim to influence their targets' perception (e.g., reputation laundering, fostering national pride), which may have been tarnished by moral violations, through sports-related events. It is crucial to recognize that these targets are not created equal. They evolve in different environments and may respond to sportswashing initiatives in different ways.

Third, there are entities that (voluntarily or not) serve the sportswashing objective (e.g., a star player, a major team or a sporting event). These entities often associate with parties, such as sports fans or club fans, that may engage in actions that align with the interests of the sportswasher (see e.g., Kearns *et al.*, 2024). Sports institutions such as international or national governing bodies (e.g., the IOC, FIFA, the Football Association of England, the DNCG of France) may also act in the sportswashers' interests; for instance, by validating a controversial country selection for a major sporting event or the purchase of a club. Sportswashers may also bribe politicians to be portrayed in a positive light, as evidenced by Qatar's practices in the European Parliament (Stevis-Gridneff *et al.*, 2022). The reality is frequently characterized by a high degree of complexity, highlighting the imperative to go beyond a superficial examination (Grix *et al.*, 2023). As demonstrated by the responses of the Professional Golf Association (PGA) to the establishment of a competing professional golf league, LIV Golf, by the Saudi Arabia's PIF, a dominant sports organization has the capacity to tailor messages to trigger emotional responses that influence perceptions of the legitimacy of the sportswashing (Nite *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, it should be noted that circumstances can rapidly evolve, as evidenced by the merger of the PGA and LIV Golf in 2023.

Fourth, sportswashing often provokes strong reactions from advocacy groups (McGillivray *et al.*, 2022) that may use media to spread their concerns. They include public opinion and non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Transparency International. These organizations can operate on a local or a global scale. Given the foreign policy dimension, governments may also be concerned and they have the power to influence the sportswasher (Haththotuwa, 2022).

Table 1. Definitions of sportswashing

Authors	Year	Discipline/ Field	Definition of sportswashing	Examples
Amnesty International	2021	Human Rights NGO	‘Sportswashing is where states guilty of human rights abuses invest heavily in sports clubs and events in order to rehabilitate their reputations. Owning a sports club or hosting an event creates positive publicity and can help airbrush over human rights violations in the country.’ (online)	Current A league champions Melbourne City are owned by City Football Group, the sports investment company of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the royal family that rules Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates.’ (online)
Chadwick	2022	Sport and Geopolitical Economy	‘A means by which a country can deflect audiences’ attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sport.’ (p.696)	The British government uses sport to drive diplomatic and trade relationships, using football as the basis for constructing a British national brand.’ (pp.696–7)
Boykoff	2022	Sociology of Sport	‘I define sportswashing as a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front. Sportswashers use mega-events to try to foment national prestige and to convey economic or political advancement.’ (p.342)	‘Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti used the scourge of homelessness to sportswash, stating that ‘I’m confident that by the time the Olympics come, we can end homelessness on the streets of LA.’ (p.343)
Fruh <i>et al.</i>	2023	Philosophy	‘A practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club [...] to subvert the way that others attend to a moral violation for which the sportswashing agent is responsible.’ (p.101)	‘While the term itself is relatively new, ‘sportswashing’ captures a phenomenon that arguably extends back at least as far as the 1934 World Cup, hosted by Mussolini’s fascist Italy, and the 1936 Olympics, hosted by Hitler’s Nazi Germany, and runs through intervening years in cases such as the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, just two years after a military coup installed a brutal dictatorship there.’ (p.103)
Grix <i>et al.</i>	2023	Politics	‘The concept of ‘sportswashing’ serves as a short-hand way of criticising non-democratic regimes for using investment in sport, sports clubs, and sports events to detract from illiberal practices in their home countries (...). We have conceptualised ‘sportswashing’ as a process involving an inherently bidirectional phenomenon which benefits both the illiberal regimes and the Western sports brands and organisations that collaborate in it.’	The second case study investigates the Saudi state’s sports investment strategy, with a deeper analysis of their partnership with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as this highlights how the ‘sportswashing’ arrangement can be manipulated to benefit both the nation state and their active partners.’

Table 1. (*Continued*)

Authors	Year	Discipline/ Field	Definition of sportswashing	Examples
Haththouwa	2023	Press	‘Sportswashing is a term used to describe countries utilising sports events to polish their reputation, leverage power in the global community and legitimise wrongdoings – giving the awareness to possible human rights violations including the repression of press, genocide and laws that restrict women and LGBTQ people.’ (online)	‘The winter Olympics in Beijing, boxing matches and LIV GOLF tournament in Saudi Arabia, and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar.’ (online)
Skey	2023	Sociology of Sport	‘Sportswashing is currently a popular neologism that has been used to write about particular types of regimes who are either seeking to bolster or manage their reputations on the international stage. [It] focuses on acts of consociation rather than deception. It is designed to build positive associations with a state/country rather than simply conceal.’ (p.760)	In January 2022, it was announced in the UK media that a Saudi-backed consortium had bought the English Premier League football club, Newcastle United.’ (p.749)
Bergkvist and Skelseid	2024	Advertising	Sportswashing is defined as the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information.’ (p.1)	‘... the 2022 FIFA Men’s World Cup in Qatar, which is seen as a prime example of sportswashing.’ (p.3)
Gerschewski <i>et al.</i>	2024	Politics	Sportswashing ‘can be described as state actors’ activities, often in cooperation with sporting organizations, with the goal of not just hiding information and deceiving, but fostering positive associations with the respective state in the minds of people. It is as a pejorative term, criticizing these activities, often used for the efforts of non-democratic states.’ (p.2)	‘In the case of Qatar, pundits coined the term sportswashing, referring to information manipulation by host nations, such as replacing or countering negative content, to improve their image abroad.’ (p.2)
Kearns <i>et al.</i>	2024	Sociology of Sport	‘Sportswashing is a tactic of morally questionable political regimes to distort attention from their ethical violations through leverage of emotional associations and media coverage that come with sport.’	‘In 2008, MCFC [English football club Manchester City] were bought by the Abu Dhabi United Group – a private equity group operated by Abu Dhabi royalty and UAE politicians. The Group has invested approximately £1.5 billion in that time ... and the club have won seven premier league titles, eight domestic cup trophies and the 2023 UEFA Champions League; achievements that would have been deemed impossible before the takeover. This has aroused criticism for not only financially distorting club football, but also as ‘one of football’s most brazen attempts to ‘sportswash’ a country’s deeply tarnished image.’ (Human Rights Watch)

Fifth, the media also play a role in covering sport in such a way that amounts to sportswashing (Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024). The role of the media in sportswashing can be analysed through either an objectivist or constructivist perspective (for a conceptual discussion of the media role in scandals, see e.g., Baugut, 2017). From an objective perspective, sportswashing is viewed as a measurable phenomenon where certain actions by organizations or governments are objectively identified as attempts to mitigate the impact of severe moral violations through the hosting or sponsorship of mega sport events. In contrast, the constructive perspective considers the sportswashing as socially constructed, heavily influenced by media narratives and the influence of other groups, such as activists and politicians (Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024). The violation of moral norms and the concomitant sport situation are necessary but not sufficient conditions to reach a determination of sportswashing. The labelling of certain sports events as sportswashing is not an inherent or objective characteristic, but rather a product of how these events are framed and interpreted by various stakeholders, especially the media.

The goals of sportswashing (distraction, minimization and normalization).

Sportswashing is the process that sportswashers use to improve their reputational capital. A word of caution is needed: indeed, sportswashing frequently includes a dose of ambiguity regarding underlying motives. Sportswashing is often justifiable on grounds (e.g., economic development, genuine interest in sport) other than the need to obscure moral transgressions. According to Fruh *et al.* (2023), sportswashers may look for several effects, including distraction from, minimization of and normalization of the moral violations.

First, distraction is the process by which many people make a positive association between a sporting event or organization they appreciate and the sportswasher. For example, the Saudi Pro League has recently recruited numerous star football players and each has several hundred million social media followers worldwide (Mutz, 2024).⁴ If web search results highlight the arrival of star football players in the Saudi Arabian national championship, few individuals might encounter web pages containing negative information about Saudi Arabia. The underlying idea could be to saturate the environment with positive messages about the sportswasher, which automatically pushes its moral transgressions into the background.

Second, moral transgressions may appear less significant than they are through minimization. For instance, Eric Garcetti, mayor of Los Angeles, seems to be downplaying the current level of homelessness in the city when he wishes for an end to this situation before the 2028 Olympic Games (Boykoff, 2022). Finally, normalization means that certain individuals may no longer perceive moral violations. The power of sport to evoke positive emotions and create communities may favour the process of normalization. Witness Chelsea fans singing in honour of the club's former Russian owner amid applause in support of Ukraine (Descalsota, 2022; Fruh *et al.*, 2023).

The sportswashing paths

Sportswashing can be distinguished as either intentional or opportunistic, depending on the motive and timing of the sportswasher. In fact, some sportswashers may have a genuine and sports-oriented interest that may legitimize the (sportswashing) agreement to some extent. Sportswashing can be designed intentionally and from scratch, while in other cases the sportswasher adopts an opportunistic stance and simply takes advantage of the course of events that may be favourable (Al Khalifa and Farello, 2021). For instance, the sportswashing allegation against Saudi Arabia has also been cited as part of a major investment plan (Vision 2030) to diversify the Saudi economy (Chadwick and Widdop, 2018; Wertheim, 2023). In the case of the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the

⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1060411/soccer-players-worldwide-digital-community-size/>

dictatorship did not take the initiative in hosting this event; rather, it capitalized on the opportunity for sportswashing (Fruh *et al.*, 2023). In some situations, we can even assume that violations will occur during or after the sporting event. For instance, some countries have been accused of sportswashing because they intend to use the sporting event to achieve controversial goals, e.g., enactment of laws and regulations for government surveillance of citizens under the guise of security (Roizen, 2023).

The mechanisms of sportswashing

Sportswashing is both viable and attractive because it can benefit from specific mechanisms linked to ‘the powerful array of positive emotions and identity-forming commitments in numerous fans’ (Fruh *et al.*, 2023, p.104). First, sportswashers can exploit the human will to win. Some fans may overlook the moral violations of a sportswasher, especially when their favourite team is winning. However, our description should not overshadow the fact that fans can stand up against what they perceive as inappropriate sportswashing arrangements, as when Bayern supporters criticized the club for its arrangement with Qatar Airways (DW, 2021). Some sports managers and athletes may also be attracted by the huge monetary rewards included in the sportswasher arrangement. Second, sportswashers can use the potential of sports to foster communities and the human desire to be part of a community that elicits strong emotions. For instance, the supporters of a given club may defend and excuse the club owner accused of moral wrongdoing from the moment they accept the owner as an group member (especially when their human desire to win is being satisfied). (For evidence regarding the in-group versus out-group bias in sport contexts, see Wann and Grieve, 2005 and Rubenson and Dawes, 2022.) Finally, sportswashing can make participants complicit, both wittingly and unwittingly.

The consequences of sportswashing

By distracting, minimizing, or normalizing moral violations, the need for sportswashers to address moral violations and change their behaviours (for instance, by improving their respect for human rights) is reduced. Sportswashing may also create a sceptical atmosphere in which the accepted principles of sport may be diminished (Fruh *et al.*, 2023). From the viewpoint of the sportswasher, the success of a sportswashing endeavour hinges on the enhancement of reputational capital. Conversely, sportswashing can be deemed a failure if the sportswasher’s image remains stagnant or deteriorates. For example, Manzenreiter (2010) demonstrates that, despite hosting the Beijing Olympics in 2008, China did not experience a notable improvement in international perceptions. Moreover, if damaging information that the sportswasher seeks to conceal is uncovered by the media, the sportswasher may face backlash effects (Bergkvist and Skeiseid, 2024).

Sportswashing also poses significant ethical challenges. At its core, it leverages the popularity and emotional appeal of sports to distract from or downplay unethical behaviour of authoritarian regimes or organizations with questionable moral records. This practice gives rise to several concerns. It may engender a state of (unwitting) complicity (or even indirect benefit) among participants in sport (e.g., athletes, coaches, fans and sports organizations) and other stakeholders (e.g., governments, corporations and journalists) (see, e.g., Grix *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, sportswashing undermines the heritage of sporting institutions by eroding their integrity and legitimacy.

Additionally, sportswashing can serve to perpetuate injustice by shielding perpetrators from accountability and potentially emboldening them to engage in further abuses. The ethical dilemma extends to athletes and sports organizations, who must confront the moral implications of participating in or endorsing sportswashed events (Fruh *et al.*, 2023). Ultimately, all stakeholders in the sports ecosystem have a responsibility to uphold ethical standards and protect human rights. In summary, while sportswashing is widespread and threatens the values of sport, there is room for research on instrumentalising sportswashing to create positive effects (Davis *et al.*, 2025).

Rationale for making the best of sportswashing

Let us briefly introduce a two-dimensional framework to distinguish four sportswashing situations (Figure 1). The first dimension corresponds with whether the sportswasher controls the media and narrative surrounding the sportswashing. With a high level of control, dissenting voices criticizing the event and promoting the cause are less likely to be heard. With the rise of less-controllable media channels, such as social networks, having control over the narrative is difficult, even for powerful actors such as states or corporations. The second dimension describes the capacity for action of the cause promoters or advocacy organizations that are harmed by the sportswashing arrangement. There is much heterogeneity among cause promoters; for those who are well prepared and have capacity for action, there are opportunities. Cause promoters can develop skills that can lead to greater control over media and narrative and increased capacity for action. Cause promoters can collaborate with independent journalists and media outlets to amplify their voices. By offering compelling stories and evidence, they can challenge the dominant narratives controlled by sportswashers. The utilization of social networks can facilitate bypassing traditional media control, thereby enabling direct and prompt communication with global audiences. Collaborations with other advocacy groups or influential figures in sport can further amplify their message. Cause promoters can leverage the platform provided by sports events to educate the public about underlying issues, such as human rights abuses or environmental concerns associated with the sportswashing entity.

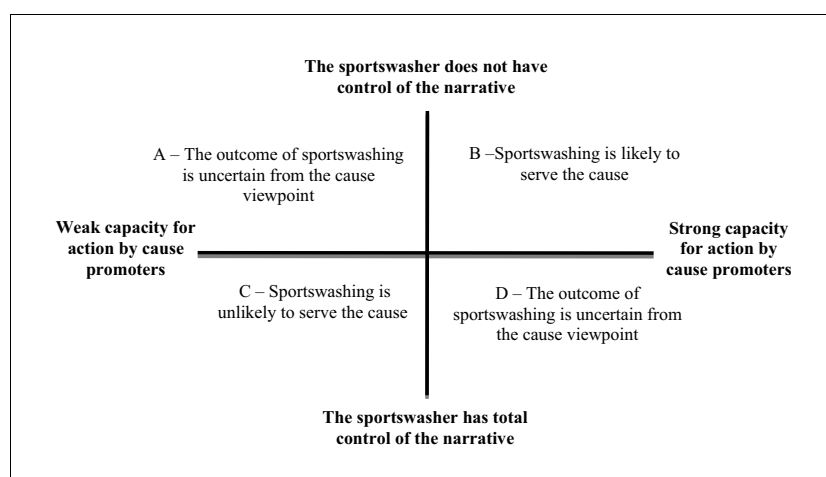


Figure 1. Characterizing sportswashing outcomes along two dimensions

The four quadrants delineate the situation of cause promoters and illustrate various outcomes that are more or less likely to be favourable to the approaches developed in this section. Quadrant A combines a weak capacity for action by cause promoters and a lack of narrative control by the sportswasher, leading to uncertain outcomes which will be revealed over time. A natural consequence could be to reinforce the capacity for action of cause promoters to take advantage of the window of opportunity offered by the sporting event (see below). Quadrant B is the most favourable situation from the cause promoters' viewpoint, as it combines a strong capacity for action by cause promoters with a lack of control on the narrative by the sportswasher, putting the cause promoters in a strong position to advance their interests. The mechanisms described below are more likely in this context. From the perspective of cause promoters, quadrant C is the worst situation, where sportswashing is likely to serve the vested interests of the sportswasher. Quadrant D represents an uncertain outcome, given the opposition between a strong capacity for action on the part of cause promoters and full control of the sportswasher over the narrative.

Of course, we are describing polar situations. An initially disadvantageous situation can evolve over time to offer more capacity for action to cause promoters. This framework is a

simplification of reality, where other agents can also intervene and make the difference (e.g., other states not directly involved in the sportswashing arrangement, competitors, independent media). Let us assume that a sportswashing arrangement is implemented and in progress. While various options exist, including boycotting affected teams and competitions (Fruh *et al.*, 2023), our focus is on maximizing the potential of sportswashing by addressing the three effects they bring about: distraction from, minimization of and normalization of moral violations. This is achieved through three key processes: attention to, maximization of and consideration of cause-related issues. We acknowledge that not all these approaches may be applicable in every situation, but they provide a foundation for advancing the causes that provoke sportswashing. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive and may complement each other (Table 2).

Leveraging media coverage of the sportswashed event to raise awareness of the cause

The most natural approach to exploit sportswashing to promote the cause at hand could be to use the extensive media coverage of sporting events to bring moral violations to the forefront of global awareness and advance the cause that created the need for sportswashing (Haththotuwa, 2022; Cook, 2022).

Table 2. Illustrative examples of strategies for making the best of sportswashing situations

Strategy	Illustrations
Leveraging media coverage of the sportswashed event to raise awareness of the cause	<p>‘Huge investments increase the profile of sports and sportswashing can backfire by drawing unwanted negative attention to a country’s human rights record.’ (Irwin, 2022)</p> <p>‘It’s a global-scale expression of the Streisand Effect: the thing they’re doing to cover their crimes is actually broadcasting them to everyone.’ (McManus, 2022)</p> <p>‘Sportswashing ... can lead to heightened awareness of the problematic actions of authoritarian regimes. For example, when the Abu Dhabi United Group took over ownership of Manchester City Football Club in 2008, fans became aware of the poor human rights record of the United Arab Emirates, where the group is backed by the royal family. ... By making sportswashing so ubiquitous, these sportswashers have actually increased awareness of how they infringe upon human rights and suffocate aspirations for democracy.’ (Morgenbesser and Filo, 2024)</p>
Transforming key stakeholders of the sportswashed event into cause promoters	<p>Naomi Osaka wrote during the Black Lives Matter movement that ‘Today ... athletes have platforms that are larger and more visible than ever before. The way I see it, that also means that we have a greater responsibility to speak up. ... There is no legal obligation for athletes to care about sportswashing, nor should there be. However, if Osaka is right, then those with a greater platform have a larger social responsibility to speak out on human rights issues. Much recent media attention has been on athletes’ willingness to compromise moral ground to gain financially.’ (Irwin, 2022)</p> <p>‘Sometimes fans push back. Newcastle United supporters formed a group (NUFC Against Sportswashing), and have repeatedly protested the club’s ties to the Saudi government. Since 2020, German club Bayern Munich’s fans have repeatedly unveiled banners critical of the club’s dealings with Qatar at matches.’ (Morgenbesser and Filo, 2024)</p>
Leveraging the sportswashing experience to raise future standards	<p>‘Even before that invasion [of Ukraine], FIFA had begun to show signs that it recognized the need to address sportswashing criticism of its award of consecutive World Cup finals to Russia and Qatar. The year before the Moscow tournament, FIFA announced a formal commitment to internationally recognized human rights standards, and pledged to take human rights into account when choosing future host nations.’ (Temko, 2022)</p> <p>‘Regarding Saudi Arabia as the possible host of the 2034 World Cup, Dennis Horak, Canada’s former ambassador to Saudi Arabia stated: ‘They saw the attention that was placed on the treatment of migrant workers in Qatar, and they know there’s going to be criticism. I think they’re hopeful that the reform efforts ... will be well along the road, and that there’ll be a lot of good stories that will sort of blunt some of those [criticisms].’ (Goodyear, 2023)</p>

Our proposition is a form of ambush marketing in which companies take advantage of their competitors' marketing efforts to gain exposure and profit (Payne, 1998). For instance, Skey (2023) notes that 'Qatar's staging of the 2022 soccer world cup has exposed it to ongoing criticism in Western media concerning human rights abuses, illiberal attitudes towards women and sexual minorities and so on' (p.757). As demonstrated by the Australian Socceroos and Football Australia, who published a video denouncing human rights violations in Qatar and used their platform to support migrant workers, attendance at a sportswashed event can be counterbalanced by individuals who challenge the prevailing sportswashing narrative (Dean, 2022). Dean even argues that 'more Australians now know about Qatar's human rights record than if the state had never been chosen to host the World Cup'. Similarly, Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics was a limited success, as the Chinese government failed to control Western media coverage of the event (Manzenreiter, 2010; Skey, 2023).

This strategy is not easily accomplished for three main reasons. First, sufficient media attention must be attracted to incriminate the sportswasher. Sportswashers are unlikely to remain passive and may seek to limit these initiatives preemptively or retroactively. A second difficulty arises from the power of sport. Some sports fans may prefer to enjoy a sporting event rather than question the host country's practices. Third, people may encounter different media coverage and become sceptical about the true purpose of the media.

To summarize, the aim is to draw attention to moral violations. Subsequently, key stakeholders, such as cause promoters, sports organizations, foreign governments, athletes, independent media and spectators may exert pressure on the sportswasher (see e.g., Nite *et al.*, 2023) by maximizing the dissonance between the sporting event and the moral violations. Ultimately, the sportswasher may genuinely consider the issues at stake. This approach is more likely to yield promising results when the situation corresponds to quadrant B, wherein cause promoters can mobilize impactful media channels without obstruction from the sportswasher.

Transforming key stakeholders of the sportswashed event into cause promoters

Second and closely linked to the publicity effect, the presence of sports stars, tourists, spectators, personalities and so forth presents an opportunity to attract increased attention, maximize the voice given to groups that are usually overlooked and prompt consideration of moral violations. Specific individuals may temporarily assume the role of spokespersons for neglected concerns. As recent examples show, these efforts take many forms. Teams and athletes sometimes wear symbols and messages during games to raise awareness of specific issues. For instance, former captain of the Australian men's national football team, Craig Foster, shared his salary as presenter of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar with the families of deceased workers and with human rights organizations (Worden, 2022). In the same vein, the 'Danish football association released a strongly worded statement that they would use their time in Qatar during the World Cup to advocate for human rights and migrant workers' (Nair, 2021). Another telling example of athlete activism is the various initiatives of Lewis Hamilton (e.g., helmet or t-shirt with a specific message, public statements, threats of boycott), a Formula 1 champion, who has repeatedly taken a position on human rights in the Middle East (Richards, 2021). These initiatives are capable of being interpreted as token actions, giving an individual a clean conscience but little more.

Similarly, sportswashing arrangements may provide the opportunity to link involved key individuals. For instance, politicians may be pressured by voters to take a stand and attend only if progress or commitments are made. Of course, these issues are complex and depend on many factors, such as the weight of the causes in the political agenda, the relationship with the sportswasher, the proximity of elections, the perception of what voters prefer and so on.

Leveraging the sportswashing experience to raise future standards

Third, in cases where the sportswashing attempt backfires or yields worse results than anticipated (see Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015, 2018; Martinez, 2022), cause promoters can direct attention

to this outcome to dissuade and deter future sportswashing attempts. For example, Qataris have abolished the kafala system in the employment of migrant workers ‘which tied their work visas to a specific job, meaning they could not change jobs, nor leave the country, without their employers’ approval’ (Temko, 2022; see also Cook, 2022). By increasing the costs and reducing the expected benefits of sportswashing, similar arrangements may become less attractive and riskier for sports-washers. But measuring the success of counter-sportswashing initiatives is challenging, in that some victories can lack depth of impact, be cosmetic or temporary, aiming at appeasing critics without implementing substantial and long-term changes.

The negative outcomes of sportswashing events can also serve to maximize reflection on the evolving role of sport in society and to prompt consideration of new safeguards against the abusive exploitation of sport. For instance, there have been several discussions about the need to adapt Financial Fair Play agreements in football to prevent dubious arrangements likely to serve sportswashing goals. Similarly, following the 2018 World Cup in Russia, ‘FIFA announced a formal commitment to internationally recognized human rights standards, and pledged to take human rights into account when choosing future host nations’ (Temko, 2022). FIFA used this innovative approach, bringing up human rights concerns with the candidates competing to organize the 2026 tournament.

These strategies are by no means exhaustive. Creating sportswashing scandals may totally change deep-rooted culture (Grolleau and Mzoughi, 2022; Grolleau *et al.*, 2020). For instance, while there were no female national teams in Saudi Arabia in 2015, there were twenty-three female national teams by 2020 (Kane, 2020). The dynamics of the scandal involve powerful forces that may require significant adjustments to strategy and culture that would otherwise be challenging to implement (Grolleau *et al.*, 2020). In extreme cases, the sportswashing arrangement may even be encouraged (or, at least not discouraged) to reach a specific goal that would otherwise remain unachievable.

Policy implications and conclusion

Rather than simply condemning sportswashing, we develop an original framework to analyse the strategy and consider how to transform sportswashing into opportunities to advance the causes that led to the sportswashing. This counter-intuitive approach reveals ways to get the best out of sportswashing. Promoters of various causes can be innovative by envisioning sportswashing as an opportunity to subvert the original intent of sportwashers. These cause promoters can repurpose sportswashing by using sport-related platforms to highlight important issues rather than distracting from them. This approach transforms sportswashing into a vehicle for activism and advocacy, reaching wide audiences. It opens avenues for new tactics and collaborative efforts to reframe narratives and incorporate critical discussions during events through social media campaigns, athlete partnerships and creative protests. Counter-sportswashing efforts foster a new form of engaged spectatorship. This shift in how activism intersects with sport could reshape the prevailing discourse.

To elaborate, let us develop how sports consumers can benefit from increased awareness of social and ethical issues when cause promoters leverage sportswashing events to highlight significant causes. The transformation of passive viewership into active engagement in social advocacy has the potential to enrich the viewing experience and foster a more informed and conscious fan base. Such engagement can encourage critical reflection on the implications of their sports consumption. By participating in discussions or campaigns initiated during sportswashing events, consumers can feel empowered and involved in driving social change. This active participation can enhance their connection to both the sport and the causes being promoted, creating a more meaningful and fulfilling fan experience. As cause promoters use sports platforms to disseminate alternative narratives, consumers are exposed to a wider range of perspectives. This diversity in storytelling can lead to a deeper understanding of global issues and inspire fans to support brands and teams that align with their values. This might include entities that engage in counter-sportswashing, fostering a sense of pride and loyalty towards socially conscious entities. Nevertheless, it is crucial to avoid

counterproductive outcomes, such as the alienation of fans who prefer to enjoy sports without being confronted with cause-related considerations.

Our reflections offer advocacy organizations and anti-sportswashing influencers different approaches to help them achieve their goals. While advocacy groups are unlikely to adopt a passive stance, we argue that they can benefit from training to leverage the opportunities presented by sportswashing. This should not be misinterpreted: attempting to use sportswashing for positive change should not inadvertently perpetuate the conditions that led to the sportswashing.

Other stakeholders have a role to play in opposing the strategies of distraction, minimization and normalization employed by sportswashing organizations. International sporting bodies might enforce stricter ethical standards for host nations, ensuring that human rights considerations are prioritized. Sustained efforts to educate the public about the implications of sportswashing might help dismantle its effectiveness and foster critical engagement among fans and stakeholders. Furthermore, encouraging investigative journalism to unveil the realities behind sportswashing initiatives might produce narratives to challenge the polished images presented by sports organizations. Collaborating with non-governmental organizations to organize joint campaigns focused on human rights might amplify voices against sportswashing and challenge the narratives constructed by sportswashers. An interesting extension would involve mobilizing the literature on social movements to shed light on how counter-sportswashing initiatives can succeed. Indeed, this literature has underscored critical factors, such as resource mobilization, political opportunism and framing processes as key determinants of success for activists, advocates, social movements and so forth (see McAdam, 2017).

Our description may seem rather linear with clear, well-defined positions, but the reality is much more complex and constantly evolving. For instance, a recent study (Gläsel *et al.*, 2025) found that among German respondents, the start of the World Cup ‘did not improve Qatar’s image but increased sympathies for the Arab world and fueled criticism of the media, the quality of democracy, and the inclusion of minorities within Germany’. Interestingly, not all sportswashing targets react the same way (Gerschewski *et al.*, 2024). Entities suspected of sportswashing are unlikely to remain passive. Counter-reactions must be anticipated, appropriate adjustments made and sufficient flexibility found. For instance, a sportswashing arrangement could spill over and lead to other forms of washing, such as the Qatargate case, involving high-ranking Brussels politicians (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

Sportswashing is easier to claim than to prove, especially because the concept ‘has been used too liberally and simplistically by western countries’ (Chadwick, 2018). A common criticism of sportswashing allegations is the overemphasis on current Western standards, often raised in relation to a specific region (i.e., the Middle East) and to a lesser extent in other contexts (e.g., developing countries, oil companies). Endeavours to tackle sportswashing should also consider the distinct contexts and challenges encountered by specific communities and adopt a multifaceted approach that acknowledges the diverse nature of sportswashing itself.

The emphasis on specific contexts can be misleading and deflect attention from subtler forms of sportswashing, where the moral accusations are less vivid. For instance, Skey (2023) cites the London 2012 Olympics as an example of a sportswashing situation ‘given that it arguably involved a former imperial power looking to raise its profile abroad and domestically, perhaps, deflect attention away from an unpopular program of austerity’ (p.760). Similarly, the French authorities, in hosting the Paris Olympic Games, have been accused of sportswashing, notably because this exceptional event would facilitate exemptions from environmental obligations and the enactment of mass surveillance regulations (Roizen, 2023). While sportswashing situations involving developed countries or Western corporations may appear less symbolic and more nuanced, they may share common characteristics with better-known sportswashing cases. Consequently, they warrant closer attention and offer intriguing avenues for research to comprehend and distinguish the specific objectives of various sportswashers.

Through the development of an original framework for the analysis of sportswashing, this paper offers an understanding of how sportswashing can be mobilized to illuminate its underlying purpose and thereby undermine the intentions of those deploying this strategy. In doing so, the paper seeks to stimulate further discussion and research on this neglected aspect of sportswashing.

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