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What Manchester City fans have to say about sportswashing

In 2008, Manchester City Football Club (MCFC) were acquired by the Abu Dhabi United Group—an entity led by Abu Dhabi royalty and UAE politicians. Over the course of this ownership, [the Group has injected approximately £1.5 billion into the club](#), an investment that has been remarkably successful. Since 2008, the club has secured seven Premier League titles, eight domestic cup trophies, and the prestigious 2023 UEFA Champions League—a level of success that was considered unfathomable prior to the acquisition. However, this remarkable transformation has not escaped criticism, much of which has centred on the status of [human rights](#) in the UAE. As a result, City’s success has not simply distorted the financial landscape of club football but also serves as one of the most prominent case studies of “sportswashing”.

What is sportswashing?

Sportswashing is a term coined to elucidate the tactic of leveraging sports to project a favourable image of a country or organisation while concealing, downplaying or complicating its negative facets. This can manifest in various forms, most notably, one-off event-based strategies and longer-term investment-based strategies.

One-off event-based strategies refer to the practice of hosting major international sporting events, such as, the Olympics or the World Cup, in an effort to leverage their prestige and significance against the host’s reputation for wrongdoing. Longer-term investment-based strategies, such as, purchasing sports clubs can have an even more profound impact on the integrity of sports and the communities that support them. Indeed, though investment-based sportswashing may appear innocuous on the surface, its repercussions on the integrity of sports and the communities endorsing them can be severe.

Man City's takeover has not only had long term economic impacts on English and European football – and, indeed, the club currently face 115 charges of alleged breaches of the English Premier League's financial rules – but also seen the club's fans transformed into proxy defenders of the UAE government and Abu Dhabi royal family. The emotional bonds between a club and its supporters are leveraged through investment-based sportswashing, creating a halo effect whereby supporters conflate their joy over their club's success with its ownership regime. The ownership regime in the case of Man City has brought unprecedented success to the club, but also represents [a government that has severely curtailed freedom of expression and subjected its opponents to torture](#). How then do fans reconcile these misdeeds with their identity as Man City supporters?

Sportswashing and fan legitimization?

There has been limited scholarly exploration into the perspectives and roles of fans of clubs owned by what some termed sportswashing regimes. What are their experiences? How are fans co-opted into such projects? How do they resist? Accordingly, as part of a wider project on [online hate in football our research team examined a popular Manchester City online fan forum in order to explore the repercussions of sportswashing on the fan community](#). The study revealed that while some fans were cognisant of the negative aspects of the club's ownership, many were willing to overlook them in their unwavering support for the team.

Notably, the users of the forum employed a variety of interconnected discursive strategies to legitimate MCFC's ownership structure and its subsequent influence on the broader landscape of football, while also simultaneously discrediting critics of the club. They employed tactics, such as, deflecting criticism onto other clubs or organisations, and dismissing allegations as unfounded. Whilst these types of discursive tactics are not unusual for football fans, who are known for tribalism, they mostly involve trivial issues relating to

the performance of the team or referring decisions, this context is different as a morally questionable regime and human rights issues frame most of the discussion concerning the club. Furthermore, some of the MCFC fans in the forum we analysed not only choose to disregard ethical transgressions by the Group but also vehemently criticised, the Group's detractors: namely, journalists reporting on the club. Instances of threats or harassment against such journalists were lauded on the forum.

Addressing the problem

One potential solution involves augmenting transparency and accountability in sports ownership. Existing club ownership regulations in the English Premier League, for instance, disqualify potential owners for prior financial misdemeanours or convictions accounted for by UK legislation, criteria unlikely to affect the representatives of repressive state regimes.

Wider reform is also needed for football's finance structures to ensure that mid or lower ranking clubs can forge a path to success without the need for the financial might of state owners. The City fans in the forum we examined were understandably bitter about football's growing wealth gap and the power of select group of European 'superclubs,' and this bitterness was key to their justification of their club's ownership by UAE state actors.

What next?

That sportswashing can provide repressive state actors with the potential advantage of the recruitment of a fervent, emotionally invested fanbase is a major concern. Instances of Man City fans harassing journalists (both online and in person) who have dared to criticise their club's ownership attest to the potential of sportswashing as a weapon with the power to distort media coverage and, thus, avoid accountability. Future investigations of sportswashing – whether at Qatari-owned Paris Saint Germain or Newcastle

United, recently acquired by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund – should be mindful of this. The intent behind sportswashing may remain opaque, but its impacts are undeniable.