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Published version

BLACK, Jack, KEARNS, Colm and SINCLAIR, Gary (2024). The Fetishization of Sport: Exploring the Effects of Fetishistic Disavowal in Sportswashing. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*.

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Black, J., Kearns, C., & Sinclair, G. (2024). The Fetishization of Sport: Exploring the Effects of Fetishistic Disavowal in Sportswashing. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*.

The Fetishization of Sport: Exploring the Effects of Fetishistic Disavowal in Sportswashing

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Abstract

Is it possible to remain a sports fan when prominent sports teams and events are utilized to “sportswash” human rights abuses and other controversies? Indeed, while there is an abundance of analyses critiquing different instances of sportswashing, the exploration of the role of sportswashing and its connection to the “sports fan” presents an essential and necessary area of investigation and theoretical inquiry. To unpick this dilemma, this article proposes the concept of “fetishistic disavowal” to help theorize the impact of sportswashing, as well as its relation to the sports fan and critical sports academic. This argues that, as spectators and fans of sport—and, moreover, as critical academics—we often acknowledge and accept that sport is used to perpetuate and even maintain a variety of social, economic, and political inequalities. Yet, while we are aware of such knowledge, we nonetheless remain fully capable of disavowing this very knowledge as an *accepted* part of sport. Given this, it is argued that the fetishization of sport can provide a suitable conduit for the fetishistic disavowal that sportswashing requires, with the concept offering a unique way of approaching sport’s inherent contradictions, while also theorizing how subjects relate to these contradictions as part of their involvement in and with sport. Where sportswashing directly implicates the fan in its implementation—relying upon a level of fetishistic disavowal between the fan and their club and proffering a disavowed acknowledgement of the effects of sportswashing and its interpellation through sport—this article outlines how applications of fetishistic disavowal provide a unique theoretical lens through which analyses of sport, and its ethical significance, can be critiqued.

Introduction: “They can keep their oil money, our club got something money can’t buy. History. Legacy. Community”

For the start of the 2023/24 English Premier League season, the Irish bookmaker and gambling company, Paddy Power, released a unique advert. The advert opens in a pub, where its patrons are watching a TV showing former footballer, Peter Crouch. In his role as a sports pundit, Crouch bemoans the fact that “another club” has suffered

“another take-over”. Crouch laments, “I just wonder who’s next”. The camera cuts to a sitting fan, dressed in a green football shirt, sat in front of an English flag, the team, “Hardlypool FC”, printed across the middle. The fan asserts: “They can keep their oil money, our clubs got something money can’t buy. History. Legacy. Community”. At this point, another fan storms in the pub, exclaiming: “Have you heard the news? We’ve been bought by an oil baron. We’re rich!”. The previously assertive fan now stands, a wide smile blazoned across his face. He turns to the pub, and begins to sing, “Gone are my ethics, and gone are my fears”. The rest of the pub joins in, “We’ve been mid-table for too many years”. Together, they all sing, “Loads a money, oily money, transfer money, we’ve got a loaded oil Sheikh to bring us on”. In West End fashion, the pub’s fans join together, leave the pub, now renamed “The Golden Goose”, and walk out to the street, club scarves held high.¹ The aforementioned stand on club take-overs, now forgotten.

There are perhaps wider contentions that can be drawn from a betting company seeking to lecture fans on the tenuity of criticising historical ties to the local team, especially when faced with the prospect of being owned by a rich “oil baron”. Instead, what is revealed is how the advert undoubtedly, and playfully, sheds light on ongoing debates and discussions regarding the effects of sportswashing in contemporary sport. The relative ease in which the fan overcomes his prior convictions—primarily, that the history, legacy, and community of a club matter more than its financial prospects—speaks to the very tensions that have come to mark sport fandom in recent years.

Indeed, to note one example, since April 2021, there has been a significant discussion and concern amongst Newcastle United fans, and various stakeholders, regarding the potential sportswashing associated with the club’s takeover by Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund (PIF) (Knight, 2022; Ryan, 2021). The acquisition of Newcastle United by the Saudi PIF raised questions and criticisms related to the human rights record of Saudi Arabia as well as concerns about the role of the Saudi government in exploiting the club as a vehicle for soft power and image improvement. In September 2023, the club’s owners used Newcastle’s stadium, St. James Park, to host two international friendlies for Saudi Arabia. Before the games against Costa Rica and South Korea, a small group of Newcastle United fans expressed mixed feelings, with some protesting the Saudi’s involvement in the club and the use of the stadium to promote the Saudi football team, and, by extension, Saudi Arabia (Taylor, 2023).

Indeed, these acts of resistance from Newcastle fans are the exception rather than the rule when it comes to English football fans reactions to sportswashing of their clubs. The majority of Newcastle fans explored by Jones et al (2023) were characterised as one of “motivated ignorance”, whereby they deliberately chose *not* to engage with political or ethical debates about the PIF. Thus, while fan resistance to sportswashing is certainly a matter in need of further research, the most pressing question here remains how fans *reconcile* their identity as supporters with an ownership regime accused of sportswashing.

Is it possible to remain a sports fan when prominent sports teams and events are utilized to “sportswash” human rights abuses and other controversies? To help unpick this dilemma, this article proposes the concept of “fetishistic disavowal” in order to theorize the impact of sportswashing, as well as its relation to the sports fan and critical sports academic. Rooted in the work of Sigmund Freud, and his account of fetishism (Freud, 1927), fetishistic disavowal is a concept drawn from psychoanalysis, and, specifically, Freud’s notion of disavowal: a mechanism of simultaneously acknowledging and disavowing some aspect of the subject’s knowledge (Freud, 1938/1940; 2003).² Applied to sport, it is contested that the concept offers a unique way of approaching sport’s inherent contradictions, as well as theorizing how subjects relate to these contradictions as part of their involvement in and with sport. Before elaborating upon this concept, however, consideration will first be given to the significance of sportswashing and the complexities it poses for the sports fan.

Sportswashing

Though the term sportswashing is frequently used to refer to “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” (Boykoff, 2022, p. 342), it is difficult to determine a direct trajectory regarding its definition (Skey, 2023). According to Boykoff (2022, p. 343), while “The word first came to prominence in 2015, just ahead of the European Games in Baku, Azerbaijan”, its appearance has nonetheless functioned as a revision of the term “whitewashing”: a practice that refers to the process of painting a surface white, but which has come to serve as a metaphor denoting a deliberate attempt to conceal or hide disturbing information.³ Indeed, in the context of sportswashing, it is

apparent that the crux of the metaphor rests upon the fact that something has been “washed-over”, and, thus, recast in a better light. Subsequently, the use of the term “washing” has also been applied to examples of “greenwashing”, a deceptive marketing practice in which a company exaggerates or falsely claims to be environmentally friendly or socially responsible in order to attract environmentally conscious consumers, and “wokewashing” (Rhodes, 2022), where companies attempt to align themselves with social justice issues, activism, or progressive values for marketing purposes, without making substantial changes in their actual practices or policies.

Furthermore, while the term sportswashing has garnered greater traction in public and media debates (Skey, 2023), it is not a new phenomenon, and, thus, can be distinguished from accounts of “soft power”. Where soft power remains a legitimate form of cultural diplomacy between nation-states, its distinction to sportswashing remains significant, Fruh et al. (2023, p. 107) assert:

Sportswashing is not simply image-building, but is instead a way of addressing a specific moral problem that is causing reputational damage. So while all states may cultivate soft power through sport, and while many states use sport to build their image, only some states are rightly accused of sportswashing—those whose engagement in sport is designed to distract away from, minimise, or normalise an injustice for which they are responsible and which, because it is visible to others, presents a reputational problem to be solved.

Accordingly, historical examples of sportswashing can be traced to the 1934 FIFA World Cup, where the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, used the football tournament to incite national pride, and the Nazi’s use of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Moreover, over recent decades, the utilization of sporting tournaments to foster a sense of nationalism and showcase the host nation on a global media platform has emerged as a prevalent motivation for national governments and heads of state to host international sporting events (Black, 2015; Parent & Chappelet, 2017). From Beijing, in 2008, to the 2014 Winter Olympic Games and 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia, sporting mega-events have been used to further geopolitical goals, and, in some cases, distract from domestic problems. On this issue, critical attention culminated around the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar; where Qatar’s hosting of the tournament was frequently labelled as an instance of sportswashing (Boykoff, 2022; Dubinsky, 2023a; 2023b; Fruh

et al., 2023). Before and during the tournament, Qatar came under fire for numerous human rights violations related to the treatment of women, LGBTQ+ groups, and the abhorrent labour conditions that migrant workers were subject to in the building of related stadia and infrastructure (Dorsey, 2022; Spalding, 2023).

With regard to sportswashing strategies, Kearns et al. (2023) identify two chief methodologies: event-based and investment-based. The former encompasses the examples outlined above: centred on hosting mega-events and leveraging the enormous attention and political and economic cachet afforded to such events. The second methodology, much under-examined by academic research (Kearns et al., 2023), involves sponsorship or ownership of major sports organisations (most notably, teams). For the purposes of this paper, the key difference between these two methodologies is the relationship between fans and the sportswashed entity. While sporting mega-events command great interest and excitement among fans, the most potent of relationships resides between fans and the team/athletes they support, rather than between fans and a specific event itself. Accordingly, investment-based sportswashing directly imposes on the relationship between fans and their supported team. Given that this relationship is defined by the emotional and financial investment of the fan in the club, this type of sportswashing raises important ethical issues for fans.

Indeed, what sportswashing provides is the opportunity for a knowable violation to be disregarded or distracted by an event or occasion that seeks to either hide or possibly cast the violation in a more positive light. This is certainly the charge that is levelled at autocratic regimes and their transgressions (Ganji, 2023). Yet, as Ganji (2023, p. 65) notes, while such assessments assert that “autocrats’ reputations are diseased”, with sport acting as “a disinfectant”, for which “publicity is a measure of potency”, at the same time, “[a] regime may not care much about polishing its reputation, ... or the sport or sports being played may do little to change how this or that regime is seen abroad”. Instead, for Ganji (2023, p. 65), sportswashing occurs when there is “information manipulation”. It is this manipulation that “us[es] the bankability of sports to discredit, displace, and debase content that global audiences might perceive as damaging” (Ganji, 2023, p. 71).

In the case of sportswashing, what seems to underlie such examples of “information manipulation” is the extent to which this manipulation is openly acknowledged by fans (Kearns et al., 2023). In fact, with regard to the Gulf monarchies, accusations of sportswashing, as well as public awareness regarding the use of

sportswashing, have not prevented these groups from hosting or bidding for sporting events, rather, “they have been expanding their investments to cover other sports aside from football” (Ganji, 2023, p. 73). This was aptly demonstrated by Mohammed bin Salman, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, an active agent in the establishment of the aforementioned PIF, owners of Newcastle United, who was noted for stating that “he does not care about accusations of ‘sportswashing’” (BBC, 2023).

If we consider, then, that the agents of sportswashing are fully aware of the accusations against them, to what extent are examples of sportswashing dependent on the implication of others, such as, the fans themselves (Fruh et al., 2023)? In cases of investment-based sportswashing, the potential complicity of the fan, as evidenced in their passion and allegiance towards a specific team, introduces a clear interdependence: namely, that examples of sportswashing are sustained and perpetuated by the commercialization and commodification of sport as well as the investment of the fan who follows and supports their favourite team. What this serves to highlight is how the emotional investment and financial contributions of fans can inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of sportswashing efforts by entities seeking to use sports for strategic image management. While, in some cases, this interdependence can extend to fans adopting a proactively hostile attitude to any perceived critic of sportswashing (Kearns et al., 2023), in other cases, it has resulted in various fan groups seeking to protest examples of sportswashing in the case of club ownership (Taylor, 2023). Indeed, while there is an abundance of analyses critiquing different instances of sportswashing, the exploration of the role of sportswashing and its connection to the “sports fan” presents an essential and necessary area of investigation and theoretical inquiry.

Fan Complicity?

What is left unconsidered in analyses of sportswashing is the extent to which the interplay between sport and the sports fan posits a “performative component” that is inherent to the sporting spectacle (Geal, 2023, p. 8). In other words, insofar as the act of sportswashing serves to interpellate the fan through forms of shared solidarity, the fans unconscious investment in sport effectively functions to compensate for sport’s less favourable aspects (Geal, 2023; Wenner, 2013). Importantly, this does not suggest that the fan is simply ‘deceived’; that, in other words, the fan is nothing more than a simple dupe, tricked as to what is actually going on in the world of sport. On the

contrary, the widespread use of the term “sportswashing” in public and media discussions of sport implies that fans are acutely aware of the potential wrongdoings of team owners, as well as the ethical, political, and economic transgressions they might be associated with.

By way of exploring these transgressions, we can consider that what underscores our connection to sport and our beloved teams is the sense of solidarity it fosters. This solidarity is built on the understanding that it encompasses the individual while simultaneously setting them apart from other individuals or other fans. It is in this sense that certain “symbols”—one’s country or one’s favourite football team, for example—can mask, hide, or “plug up a hole” in the various fictions and fantasies that underlie our day-to-day lives (Neroni, 2022, p. 61), and not least our investment in sport. Much like the fans in the Paddy Power advert, what such admiration can provide is the opportunity to overlook those incidences where unethical violations are concealed by the act of sportswashing, allowing us, in the end, to maintain the fantasies, fictions, and illusions that sport relies upon and encourages (Black and Reynoso, 2024).

This points to a unique account of how the sports fan maintains a certain complicity in examples of investment-based sportswashing. Undoubtedly, while “fans and athletes are not complicit in a sportswashing regime’s wrongdoing in any direct way”—as Fruh et al. (2023, 107) make clear, “Ordinary fans do not execute people for being gay, and they are frequently not part of a political system in such a way as to be responsible for voting for vicious human rights abusers”—acts of sportswashing are also not simply denied or rejected by the fan. While fans are clearly not deceived by the potential effects of sportswashing, they are open to a process of “disavowal”. That is, while fans may be fully aware of examples of sportswashing, this does not negate their attachment to the club. In such cases, examples of disavowal “allows subjects to maintain that they are in fact addressing the attachment when in reality a deep-seated commitment to it remains” (Fletcher, 2018, p. 49).

In the proceeding sections, specific attention will be given to explaining how examples of sportswashing rely upon a particular type of disavowal—that referred to as “fetishistic disavowal”.

Disavowal in Sport

In its simplest definition, disavowal describes “a powerful psychic response, where the subject sees something but unconsciously chooses to pretend they did not” (Neroni, 2022, p. 58). Importantly, disavowal does not refer to denial; instead, as Zupančič (2022a) makes clear, in cases of disavowal, “I keep behaving and acting as if I didn’t know what I know and what I’m able to clearly state as my knowledge”. Referring explicitly to the French psychoanalyst, Octave Mannoni, examples of disavowal are encapsulated in the phrase: “I know very well, but all the same...” (Mannoni, 2003).⁴

Disavowal functions by allowing the subject to disown their knowledge in such a manner that a psychic enjoyment is proffered, or, as McGowan (2022a, p. 70) highlights in the case of voting for unsavoury political candidates: “If I know that a candidate or political position will harm my own interest, this makes supporting them all the more enjoyable, provided that I can disavow the knowledge of this harm and avoid openly confronting it”. Such examples bear a specific relation to sport. When we consider that our investment in sport requires that certain knowledge be disavowed, such as, the potential permanent injury that can be inflicted in, for instance, boxing, or the vast economic differences between Olympic teams in view of talent identification and training support, then, it is clear that our investment in sport is subject to various forms of disavowal. The contention to be made here is that it is through this disavowal that our very enjoyment in sport is maintained (Black and Reynoso, 2024).

Certainly, these examples take on an even greater significance in the case of sportswashing. Take, for example, the case of Matthew Hedges, a British PhD student, who, in May 2018, was arrested in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Held in custody without undergoing a fair trial and deprived of legal representation, Hedges was administered medication against his will; subjected to extended stretches of isolation; and eventually coerced into signing a false confession, thus leading to a life sentence (Archer, 2021; Osborne, 2018). While Hedges was “subsequently released and granted clemency after an international outcry by the British government and human rights organizations”, Archer (2021, pp. 557-558) highlights how, “During Hedges’ imprisonment, a number of sports journalists pointed out that the owner of Manchester City, Sheikh Mansour, was not only a member of the UAE royal family but also the deputy prime minister and the brother of the president”. Yet, what proved particularly strange about the incident was the extent to which “significant numbers of Manchester City fans on social media came out in support of the legal system of Abu Dhabi” (Wilson, 2019, cited in Archer, 2021, p. 558). As Archer (2021, p. 558) reflects, “the

selective perception involved in fandom appears to lead fans to adopting a point of view according to which a legal system which can detain someone in solitary confinement without trial is a morally acceptable one”. In other incidences, fan reaction sought to denounce the integrity of the journalists covering the story, with others turning to social media to make their defence for the UAE (Archer, 2021).

It is perhaps easy to disregard these examples as reflecting the actions of a small proportion of the Manchester City fanbase, positions that many of their fans would, presumably, find abhorrent. Yet, while 2022 would see “the first sportswashing Derby” in England, between Manchester City and Newcastle United (Cunningham, 2022),⁵ John Hird, founder of the ‘NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing’ campaign group, and speaking before the Saudia Arabia friendly against Costa Rica, noted:

Ok lots of people *accept* that Newcastle are owned by the Saudi regime and they don’t see any alternative, but this is too much. It’s allowing them to use the club, the region, the city as a giant billboard to deflect attention away from their many crimes (Volpe, 2023, italics added)

What remains significant to Hird’s remarks is the very way in which such ownership seems to be “accepted” by a majority of the fanbase.⁶

In trying to understand this phenomenon, and in seeking to navigate and maintain their club identity, Jones et al. (2023) refer to fans engaging in examples of “motivated ignorance”: “a specific type of ignorance that is created by the individual who is aware that the information exists, and is freely available, but makes a conscious and deliberate decision to avoid it” (2023, p. 6). Importantly, as they highlight, motivated ignorance is not “a coping mechanism”, it is, instead, “a strategy that actively avoids threatening information” (11). In their study of Newcastle United fans, “motivated ignorance relates to freely available information about the Saudi regime that is actively avoided by fans in order to protect their sense of social identity as a fan of Newcastle United” (6). Additionally, Kearns et al.’s (2023, p. 16) examination of Manchester City fans’ legitimation of their ownership by the Abu Dhabi United Group outlined how the charge of sportswashing was discredited within the fan community: “the charge of sportswashing as it pertains to their club is so self-evidently ludicrous that there is no need to substantively refute it”.

Consequently, while examples of motivated ignorance emphasise the extent to which fans avoid information, which may be considered as harmful to their identity in supporting a particular team, the degree to which this ignorance is “conscious” and “deliberate” relies upon the assumption that, in the case of protesting sportswashing, one can simply inform and educate “the fan” out of their very ignorance. Rather, as the countless reports on sportswashing in the media attest to, and the various protests that have been organised online and outside certain football grounds reveal (BBC, 2022; Ostlere, 2023; Fahey, 2023), the very problem of sportswashing may not necessarily be one of ignorance. While those partaking in motivated ignorance are ignoring the knowledge that threatens their club attachment, they are, nonetheless, aware, and often fully cognizant, of this very knowledge. Consequently, what accusations of ignorance ignore, or what they fail to fully account for, is how one’s ignorance is maintained *against* one’s better knowledge (Kuldova, 2019; Pfaller, 2014).

Working contrary to the libertarian and enlightenment view that one can escape one’s ignorance through better knowledge, what is belied in such accounts is the extent to which, today, our knowledge of certain atrocities, violations, and malpractices are widely known and easily accessible. In the case of the Manchester City fans, the lack of substance exercised in such articulated dismissals functioned as a form of disavowal that allowed fans to position the club as unfairly persecuted by its rivals: the sport’s governing bodies and the media (Kearns et al., 2023). This disavowal involved not merely the discursive legitimization of City’s ownership, but also the de-legitimation of its critics, an attitude which manifested in threats against journalists (Cohen, 2021).

It is for this reason that “More knowledge can augment the amount of enjoyment that subjects obtain from their disavowal of what they know” (McGowan, 2022a, p. 69). In effect, our enjoyment is tied to the disavowal of this knowledge, a fact best displayed in our relation to commodities:

The enjoyment of the commodity in contemporary capitalist society requires a delicate balancing act between ignorance and knowledge. On the one hand, the consumer must know that some sacrifice went into the making of the commodity, but on the other hand, the consumer must be able to claim ignorance about this sacrifice to avoid feelings of guilt. What renders us guilty is always our ignorance, not our knowledge. Our efforts to remain ignorant about coltan

mines in the Congo reflect our complicity with the militias that run them.
(McGowan, 2016, p. 103)

Given this, to ascertain the complicity implied in cases of sportswashing we must first distinguish how examples of disavowal function to support examples of sportswashing, which, as the following will assert, suggest a level of fetishistic disavowal between fan and club.

‘I know very well, but all the same...’: The Function of Fetishistic Disavowal in Sportswashing

As spectators and fans of sport, and, moreover, as critical academics, we acknowledge and accept that sport is used to perpetuate and even maintain a variety of social, economic, and political inequalities, for which, in most cases, we remain fully aware of such knowledge, yet nonetheless fully capable of disavowing this very knowledge as an *accepted* part of sport. As Jones et al. (2023, p. 13) reveal in their study of fan responses to the takeover of Newcastle United, “For some fans, political issues were something to be avoided through watching football, rather than being directly involved within the sport”.

For this reason, examples of fetishistic disavowal remain central to sportswashing, and, in particular, to the specific ways in which sportswashing functions interdependently with the clubs and fans who rely upon its affects. Notably, examples of fetishistic disavowal exhibit “a double awareness”, indeed, “an excess of knowledge rather than its lack” (Kuldova, 2019, p. 768). Fetishistic disavowal does not express the naivety of the fetishist, nor does it suggest that they are deceived or unaware of the truth. Too easily such negative appraisals have been found amongst the humanities and social sciences, where “a misconception that fetishism is grounded [in] [sic] misconception, error, false consciousness or misrecognition” has been encouraged (Kuldova, 2019, p. 768-769, italics removed). Rather, fetishistic disavowal denotes the process by which one’s disavowal is materialized and encompassed in a fetish—be it some object, symbol, or behaviour (Žižek, 2003). In the case of Newcastle United fans this has resulted in certain fans “wearing homemade Arabic head coverings and robes” (Brown, 2021). What the fetish encompasses for the subject is the capacity to “know and not know” (McGowan, 2020a, p. 6); in other words, “Fetishism allows us to have

our cake and eat it . . . , to have satisfaction without avowing the role that loss or sacrifice plays in this satisfaction”.

It is in this regard that we can begin to see how, in examples of sportswashing, it is *sport* itself, and, specifically, one’s favourite club or athlete, that functions as the fetish. This is easily conceived when we consider how supporting a particular team can come to hold great significance for a fan. In the case of clubs, such as the previously mentioned Manchester City or Newcastle United, the communal ties that these clubs maintain are often held in high regard, with fans valuing their extensive and esteemed histories as well as the regional significances that they come to represent.

In fact, to help support this point, note the following example from Kuldova (2019, p. 776), who comments on the relationship between outlaw motorcycle clubs and their “sacred patches”:

The patch embodies the values of the bikers; it is the materialization of their brotherhood ideology, codes of honor and alternative legal structures. . . . The patch is not only an embodiment of the biker value system that serves the reproduction and expansion of the group, or just a desired brand in its own right, enhanced by popcultural mystique (think of *The Wild One* with Marlon Brando or *Sons of Anarchy*), but also collectively it can be seen as a totem of the respective biker clan. But on an individual level, for many it approximates more a fetish than a totem, even if collectively shared—it is tattooed on the skin, worn on the body, hanged around the neck, adorning almost every item worn, not to mention the motorcycles. . . . The club insignia is a fetish in its own right, an object with a transformative power, an object that interpellates people into action, both collectively and individually.

It is possible, from this example, to exchange Kuldova’s account of the bikers’ patch for the passion that one may hold for a favourite club, and their badge, which is often revered by the fan in the form of commercial insignia, or, in some cases, tattoos. Indeed, what underscores these examples of fetishism is that the fetish and its “interpellation is widely recognized, celebrated and ritually reproduced” by the fan (Kuldova, 2019, p. 776): there is, in other words, no distance between the fan and their fetish; they fully embrace the fetishized object.

Accordingly, in the case of sportswashing, what remains fetishistic is the exact way in which examples of sportswashing are fully acknowledged by the fan; an acknowledgement that neither diminishes nor undermines their fanship. As Geal (2023, p. 8) explains:

The fan of a club bought by a rich repressive regime ... can therefore believe something like ‘I know well that “our” club’s new owners are guilty of human rights abuses, but all the same “our” increased wealth means that “we” have bought better quality players who have allowed “us” to win prestigious trophies’.

Despite the fan’s better knowledge, it is in the “but all the same” that the fetishization of “our” club allows the fan to fetishistically disavow their knowledge and its, perhaps, unfavourable effects (Zupančič, 2022b). In a sense, sportswashing directly implicates the fan in its implementation, relying upon a level of fetishistic disavowal between the fan and their club, which proffers a disavowed acknowledgement of the effects of sportswashing and its interpellation through sport.

Fetishism and the Fan: Acknowledging Lack in Sport

While the aforementioned sections have sought to introduce the notion of fetishist disavowal and its relation to sportswashing, what remains to be discussed is the role that sportswashing plays for the sport fan. Why, despite the evidence, do fans remain complicit in supporting their team, and, why, when faced with the myriad of reports denouncing the sportswashing of popular international sporting events, do fans continue to watch and support these events?

To answer these questions, it is important to remember that it is in accordance with the fetishized object—in this case, the favoured club—that “the fetishist manages to find an object that promises complete satisfaction by facilitating the disavowal of lack” (McGowan, 2020b, p. 236). While the notion of lack remains a central concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis (Lacan, 2004), its evidence in sport can be found in the various ways in which sport remains an important part of our sociality; forming an integral part of the symbols, fantasies, and desires that come to constitute the subject (Black, 2023; Black and Reynoso, 2024; Reynoso, 2021). Where sport plays a

particular role is in the disavowal it provides for the subject. This speaks not simply to the various excesses that characterizes our sporting participation (the excessive and repetitive nature of training) and spectatorship (the excessive alcohol consumption or time given to watching sport), but also in the extent to which sport's political economy merges with fandom in "an attempt to find meaning and community in a society that denies them" (Kalman-Lamb, 2019, p. 522). Thus, for the sports fan, lack can be disavowed by "watch[ing] sporting events and feel[ing] a part of something that is larger than themselves", indeed, where one "feel[s] like they are part of a team and part of a community of others who are also part of that team" (Kalman-Lamb, 2019, p. 522).

This link between political economy and fandom bears a notable link to Marx's "commodity fetishism", and, by extension, the general commercialisation of sport, where sponsorship deals and broadcasting rights can help aid practices of sportswashing. We do, however, suggest a significant difference between the application of fetishistic disavowal and Marx's account of commodity fetishism; for which, in accordance with Marx's general oeuvre, it is the fascination for the commodity which must be overcome. In other words, the subject, under capitalism, is meant to grasp and overcome their alienation. While, for Marx, our "definite social relation[s]" become "the fantastic form of a relation between things" (Marx & Engels, 1996, p. 83), an account of fetishistic disavowal, as displayed in our application, offers an opportunity to identify and critique the complications inherent to such fascination. Here, the concept of fetishistic disavowal points to the specific way in which it is this shared sense of lack, on behalf of both the subject and society, which is disavowed (Žižek, 2008). As argued in critiques of commodity fetishism, it is not that our concealed social relations must be revealed but lack itself which is disavowed as part of our sporting relations (relations with our club and other subjects). What sportswashing capitalises on, in a literal sense, is how one's fetish—that is, one's club—comes to disavow such lack. The identification at play provides a disavowal of lack, while, at the same time, producing the very other(s)—the other team, the sporting rivals—for which one's lack can be transferred to (Rothenberg, 2022).

For the community whose local club is suddenly bought by a rich owner, this sense of disavowal culminates in the fans' identity, and, thus, the potential to disavow the less favourable aspects of their sportswashing owners. While fans know perfectly well that their owners may be in breach of human rights violations, for which their club serves as an opportunity to distract from such concerns, equally, they remain well-aware

of the potential successes and failures that come to characterise sport, and no less the game of football. Yet, what none of this comes close to preventing is the veneration that their club (i.e., their fetish) provides—a veneration which, in certain scenarios, can result in fans openly deriding the evidence of journalists, freely partaking in online abuse, or succumbing to suggestions that lay claim to the conspiracies effectively working against their club (Black et al., 2023; Kearns et al., 2023). In the end, the club remains a fetish for the disavowing fan, who can acknowledge both its role in the perpetuation of sportswashing and its social and personal significance—an unchallengeable significance that belongs only to them and their associated fan group, as Geal asserts (2023, p. 4):

The club’s players may be millionaire playboys, the owners may be oligarchs and/or sportswashers, the other fans may increasingly be corporate stooges pricing the ostensibly ‘authentic’ members of the community out of the game, but the fetishistic identification with the club *qua* “us” disavows these castrations, and transforms the politically meaningful conflict between oppressors and oppressed into the politically passive (and ritualised) conflict between one club’s fans and a rival club’s fans.

Conclusion and Final Thoughts

To understand the extent of fans’ complicity in sportswashing, we must pay a final consideration to the role of sport itself. As noted in the previous section, when so much of sport remains indebted to a capitalist infrastructure that feeds on the fetishization of the club and its social significance, then it is possible to observe how the truth is paradoxically exposed in the very way in which the fetish functions to hide it. This is supported by the fact that in order for the fan to disavow the act of sportswashing, one must paradoxically avow—that is, acknowledge—its existence (Sbriglia, 2017).⁷ Consequently, it is “In the act of fetishistic disavowal, [that] subjects evince a double attitude toward what they know: they know while disavowing this knowledge” (McGowan, 2022b, p. 92). By acknowledging the presence of what is simultaneously denied, an engagement with fantasy provides an added dimension of defiance for the subject, so that, paradoxically, the falsehood inherent in the fantasy enhances its ability to provide enjoyment (McGowan, 2022b). While McGowan (2022b) examines these

paradoxes in relation to examples of racist fantasy, we can extend his account to the various fantasies that structure and constitute our investment in sport.⁸ In doing so, we can consider how sport's apparent meritocracy, the perseverance and diligence that characterises our sporting endeavours ("there's always next year"), and the values of fairness, teamwork, and character development that underscore the pervasive effects of the "great sports myth" (Coakley, 2015), all play a substantial role in entrenching one's involvement in sport. Indeed:

By accepting the existence of what one also denies, one is able to include the act of defiance within the fantasy. The investment in the fantasy becomes even more of a transgression when one knows better. One transgresses not just an external authority but also one's own knowledge. The falsity of the fantasy in this way contributes to its power to deliver enjoyment. (McGowan, 2022b, p. 93)

Ultimately, it is the sporting fantasy—compromised as it is by rampant commercialization, a victory at all costs attitude, and examples of sportswashing—that comes to play a central and inherent function in maintaining our enjoyment in sport (Black and Reynoso, 2024).⁹

Moreover, it is for this reason that we can tentatively suggest that the practice of sportswashing does not stand separate to sport: it has not besmirched sport's former sanctity, rather, it is sport itself—its administration, organisation, and the investment and fetishization that it requires of fans—that endows it an active role in eliciting examples of sportswashing. With so much of sport invested in the paradoxes of (dis)avowing one's knowledge, examples of sportswashing often end-up locating sport in 'quick fix' solutions to ongoing political problems (Weintrobe, 2013b, p. 8).

Equally, the relative ease in which the fetishization of sport becomes attributable to acts of sportswashing sheds new light on the contention that "Sportswashers ... putrefy what they use" (Fruh et al., 2023, p. 109). In such cases, it is the corrupting and polluting influence of sportswashing that serves to sully sport with contentious politics and grave injustice. Certainly, while it may be conceived that "The sportswasher takes something sacred and renders it profane" (Fruh et al., 2023, p. 110), what such assessments rely upon is the presupposed contention that sport embodies some untainted prior form that is exempt from both corruption and inequality. Instead, what

these assessments reveal is how the fetishization of sport may provide a suitable conduit for the fetishistic disavowal that sportswashing requires. Indeed, as any sports fan knows, yet fetishistically disavows, sport remains beset by a number of social inequalities relating to racism, sexism, disability, and class, with sport also perpetuating and transforming capitalist disparities. Ironically, the presumption that sport can remain independent of such structural inequalities, and act as an unalloyed good in a flawed society, tacitly reiterates the fallacy that sports scholars frequently seek to refute, namely that sport can somehow be siloed off from politics.

Accordingly, while sporting inequalities have been helpfully outlined and detailed, and though some of the broader and underlying contentions in using sport to foster international relations is contested, very rarely do these studies ever consider the relevance of sport's role in doing so—that is, *why should sport be used, and, more specifically, is sport worthy of such an application?* Indeed, when so much of sport is rigged by various social, political, and economic problems, all of which remain widely acknowledged and studied by academics, in light of such knowledge, can *we*, and should *we*, consider sports as a relevant phenomenon in cultural and political diplomacy?

The assertion to be made here is that too often critical accounts of sport remain indebted to examples of disavowal: that while, yes, sport continues to have its problems, it nonetheless can be used as a force for good. In effect, we distance ourselves from the knowledge of sport's less appealing aspects, in order to maintain our very relation to it. Critically engaging with sport's adoption as a function of foreign policy (soft power) and sportswashing requires that one acknowledges the political tensions that sport encourages and sustains, while also distancing oneself from this very criticality by nonetheless asserting that:

Those working in and through sport are well served by the notion of sport enabling cultural relations, forging an enlarged common good and being seen as a resource and public space which can help with making the art of the possible, possible (Jarvie, 2021, p. 15).

Ultimately, for the critical academic, they can continue to acknowledge the problems with sport, while disavowing this very knowledge in the act of watching, partaking, or supporting their favourite club.

Indeed, this unquestioned belief in the notion of sport as a unilateral good is a central trope in how sportswashing projects are defended. Facing criticism for the awarding of the 2018 World Cup to Russia in the wake of its invasion of the Crimean peninsula, FIFA President, Sepp Blatter, insisted that the tournament would stabilise European politics, arguing that “football is stronger than any other movement” (Gibson, 2015). Similarly, Blatter’s successor, Gianni Infantino, defended the hosting of the 2022 World Cup in Qatar—a state criticised for its repressive laws and human rights abuses—by claiming that the tournament was responsible for positive changes in the country’s laws regarding migrant workers (Mulvenney, 2022). In these cases, and others, the administrators who facilitate sportswashing attempt to evade criticism through the assertion that sport can transcend its political context and force positive change on the strength of its own unique but unspecified qualities.

It is in this way that sport provides the perfect fetish. Insofar as it is sport itself that becomes the fetish, the various inequalities that sport relies upon, and sustains, become easily disavowed in examples of sportswashing. To maintain one’s enjoyment in sport, one has to fetishistically disavow the numerous inequalities that sportswashing brings to light. In the end, one has to accept the fact that in enjoying one’s favourite team, the various misdemeanours and violations of its owner has to be disavowed in order to maintain one’s attachment to the club.

In future analyses of sportswashing we propose that examinations of the topic must contend with the assertion that sportswashing remains an inherent component of sport, and not something that can simply be critiqued, and, therefore, undermined. The fetishization of sport—be it a favourite club, player, or manager— encourages the fan to fetishistically disavow the capitalist structure underpinning contemporary sport. This also speaks to the critical sports academic. That is, in order to engage in any critical investigation of sport, is to accept that our enjoyment in sport is ultimately maintained through identifying and tackling the problems and inequalities that sustain sport’s fetishization; a fetishization best encapsulated in the hope that it can function as a source for good. Becoming aware of this can help elaborate on the ethics of sport in a way that acknowledges the complex psycho-social processes enveloping the sports fan and critical commentator. In examining the way in which sportswashing relies upon and encourages the fetishization of sport, the concept of fetishistic disavowal provides a theoretical lens through which sport’s contradictions can be approached and critiqued.

Endnotes

¹ The song sung by the football fans is a revised version of the 1933 song, “The Gold Diggers’ Song (We’re in the Money)”, sung by Ginger Rogers, from the film, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). A clip of the advert can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG27kweuXJw>

² The concept of fetishistic disavowal has since been popularised by the Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek (Žižek, 2008).

³ Whitewashing can also refer to the practice of casting white actors in roles originally intended for characters of a different race, ethnicity, or cultural background.

⁴ In *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* (1956), Mannoni used Shakespeare’s characters to refer to the psychological defence mechanisms that allowed colonial subjects to disavow the oppressive nature of the colonial system in order to survive or cope with the harsh reality of colonization. Through, for example, the disavowal, “I know very well that we are oppressed, but all the same, we can find a way to live with it”, a complex psychological characteristic of the colonial experience was identified. While Mannoni’s work remains important in revealing the ways in which individuals and groups cope with uncomfortable or contradictory beliefs and realities, his work has been critiqued for promoting a dependency complex between the colonised and coloniser (see Swartz [2022] for such a critique and Lane [2002] for a consideration of the ongoing importance of Mannoni’s thinking to postcolonial studies).

⁵ Manchester City are owned by the Abu Dhabi United Group, a private equity group run by Sheikh Mansour, vice president and deputy prime minister of the UAE; Newcastle are, as previously noted, owned by Saudia Arabia’s PIF.

⁶ Indeed, this widespread tacit acceptance of sportswashing is something of an under researched area, both with regard to academia and the wider sports media. Smith’s assertion (2021), in the *New York Times*, regarding the lack of protests by Man City fans against their Abu Dhabi ownership is a relatively rare example of this development attracting comment, and even that came in a piece primarily focused on City’s Manchester neighbours, Man United, protesting against *their* ownership. It is protests,

rather than the lack of them, that earn attention. The acceptance of a club's ownership arrangement manifests itself in non-events, in the continued smooth running of club events, and in the consistent financial and emotional support from fans. In the case of ethically compromised ownership regimes (most pertinently those charged with sportswashing), this very absence of notable displays of resistance is worthy of greater attention from academics and journalists alike.

⁷ As Kuldova (2019, p. 777) explains, there is “a doubling of knowledge” in fetishistic disavowal.

⁸ In examples of racist fantasy, McGowan (2022b, p. 92) notes how “on the one hand, they [the racist] know that there is no racial hierarchy, that it has no biological justification. But on the other hand, they act as if it does exist. The actions defy their knowledge”.

⁹ Elsewhere, Culbertson (2005, p. 77) explains, “In order to compete at all an athlete is obliged to accept the notion of the level playing field, yet there cannot be a single elite athlete who is unaware of the fictitious nature of this notion”. We can elaborate upon this by noting how such a notion must be disavowed.

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