

**For the love of 'sportswashing'; LIV Golf and Saudi Arabia's push for legitimacy in elite sport**

DAVIS, Leon, PLUMLEY, Dan <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7875-0969>> and WILSON, Rob

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## **For the love of 'sportswashing'; LIV Golf and Saudi Arabia's push for legitimacy in elite sport**

**Rationale:** The purpose of this article is to provide an understanding of the emergence of LIV Golf, a new tour in the sport of professional golf, funded by finances from the Saudi Arabian sovereign wealth, the Public Investment Fund (PIF).

**Approach:** Constructed through a range of theoretical concepts and media information, this article explains the concept and format of LIV Golf, traced through the economic structures of professional team sports, the emergence of breakaway competitions and the use of sport to leverage and legitimise what has been termed as a 'soft power' approach.

**Findings:** This article explores the wider strategy of the PIF in relation to LIV Golf with consideration of Saudi Arabia's quest for legitimacy on the global sporting stage. We explore how the LIV tour has brought the concept of sportswashing into sharp focus, whilst fracturing men's professional golf and becoming a threat to the dominant PGA TOUR. We provide insights into what this might mean for golf and other sports in the future.

**Research Contribution:** This article provides new insight into how a government is using the sports faction of its entity to legitimise itself in a global sport. We also discuss the concept of sportswashing, which has been under researched in academic studies.

**Keywords:** sportswashing, sports, **competition design**, golf, governance

## Introduction

Exiting 2021, it was postulated by many scholars that 2022 would become the year of 'sportswashing' (see Zidan, 2022). Sportswashing is used to define the use of sport, by oppressive governments or leaders to legitimise their regimes and distract from human rights abuses (Fruh et al, 2022). The number of events taking place in countries with authoritarian regimes, starting with the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing, China, and culminating with the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar, would see a new era for sport events. However, one event circuit has recently come to the forefront of the concept of sportswashing and brought the topic to the mainstream media in ways other sports have not before. LIV Golf. Other sports events have been added to sporting calendars as part of a World Championship circuit or event (Formula 1, Boxing, WWE); have been 1-2 events as part of a recognised professional golf tour (European Tour and LET Tour); or part of the Olympic or FIFA World Cup rotation. However, the creation of LIV Golf tour is perceived to be a direct threat to the elite global professional tours in golf. LIV Golf is very much a new approach to financing and operating a professional sport competition and one that we have never seen before.

This article explains the concept and format of LIV Golf and attempts to highlight some of the motives for LIV Golf. There is a brief exploration regarding the concept of sportswashing, which has been under researched in academic studies. We also consider the wider financial aspects of professional team sports that has helped to stimulate this competition and given LIV Golf some leverage to launch the product. This article is designed to position the discussion of competition design, sportswashing and LIV Golf for further examination. It is a timely piece and one that can encourage further research in the field. **Given the myriad of factors that surround LIV Golf, positioning the paper in one area is challenging. Therefore, we have approached this examination of LIV Golf so far firstly with a wider consideration to**

professional sport competition governance and design and, latterly, to the sport of golf itself. We are also aware that there is an event aspect to this competition but given the backdrop of LIV Golf we would argue that at this point in time, the event itself is merely a sideshow for other motivating factors. As such, the following sections are positioned in a way to consider wider governance factors and outline the challenge for the sport of golf that is currently in the middle of a power struggle between two competing business entities.

### **Professional Sport, Economic Models and Finance**

When considering the concept of LIV Golf, it is important that we critique the models of competition design and governance in professional sport. To understand this further, we need to underline the sporting 'field' in whatever context or sport we are referring to. In this regard, clubs, players, competition organisers must co-ordinate match schedules since they cannot produce them in isolation. Potential spectators must be informed where and when matches occur. In turn, spectators need accommodation and a means by which payment can be extracted from them while restricting access to the sport to non-payers. Thus, enclosed stadia (or some form of seating/standing area) are necessary features of professional sports supply. Characteristics like these clearly indicate that, rather like production, distribution and consumption of other goods and services, professional sports can be viewed as an economic process (Plumley and Wilson, 2022). Inputs such as labour - the athletes, manager, and coach - are combined with capital - the sporting field, equipment and so on - to produce, along with another team or player in the league or competition, a product - the fixture - that is sold to consumers - spectators and supporters - typically in a stadium, but also to broadcasters and commercial partners around the globe (Plumley and Wilson, 2022).

The challenge with this with LIV Golf is that the competition format is attempting to bridge the divide between individual sport and team sport in professional golf. Indeed, part of the

format of LIV Golf is that players will compete as part of teams and there is a clear ‘league’ element embedding in its design (Hibbitt, 2022). Traditionally, it might have been hard to view golf through the production lens of team sports. In the past, it would have lacked some of the desired elements. For example, athletes who compete in golf, tennis, athletics, and boxing do so in conditions better described as tournaments as the regularity of contact between opponents is less and more of a one-off in nature. Due to the scarcity of team formats on the main professional tours in golf, the economic need to organise the production process through co-ordination of labour is naturally less. Thus, substitutes do not appear in boxing, tennis, or golf as part of the natural order of play. Moreover, athletes are not traded between competitors. However, LIV Golf has changed this landscape and has put in place parameters which mean that the PGA Tour now has a direct competitor, and so certain elite professional golfers are being left with a choice over which tour they commit to (Huggan, 2022a). This alone brings with it a multitude of management and governance issues that need to be considered.

Some previous work that has focused on measuring competitive balance in professional team sports (e.g. Ramchandani, Plumley, Boyes & Wilson, 2018) has likened the theory of managing professional team sports (and leagues) to that of managing any team in any industry. One clear similarity is that managing any team in any particular context is a challenging task. The idea of a team working together in the first place suggests that there must be collaboration between different actors over time (Berlin, 2014). Furthermore, it is important that there are common incentives for a team to function effectively alongside the following important components of: common responsibility (Thompson and McHugh, 2002), adaptability (Barker, 1999), trust (Moreland and Levine, 2002; Morita and Burns, 2012), communication (Berry, 2011) and co-operation (Schuman, 2006). When we state common incentives, we are not just talking about pursuing the interest of one individual and their own interests, but rather the organisation’s

goals and objectives. Focusing on the collective should, in turn, contribute to the effective functioning of the team. This is an interesting point in the dynamics of LIV Golf. Nobody, at present, is quite sure what the collective action is. This returns us to the structure of individual sports versus team sports. In team sports, the setup is very clear. Fixtures are regular and have a clear start and end point. Supporters can buy season tickets and become invested in the journey from the outset and maintain a connection throughout any given season. LIV Golf is exploring elements of this approach with their structure. They have a league and team element embedded within the format which they believe is stimulating fan interest (CITATION, 2022). However, a difficult challenge from a fan perspective is the geography of major sporting events and the fact that many individual sports (e.g. Formula 1, golf, tennis) tour around the world. Thus, the ability for a fan to follow every event physically in person is reduced. This, in turn, makes the broadcasting offer even more important so that fans can be engaged throughout the whole calendar.

Additionally, the issue of recruitment of top-ranked players is an issue at present for LIV Golf. If a professional golfer chooses to join the LIV tour, then are automatically excluded from the PGA Tour, which includes all the highest ranked tournaments in professional golf outside of the four majors<sup>1</sup>. This also denies the player a chance to participate in the two biggest men's team events, the *Ryder Cup* and the *Presidents Cup*. Again, here we see some of the nuances compared to golf and more traditional team sports. In team sport competitions it is stated that the perfect game is a symbiotic contest between equally matched opponents, essentially through the acquisition of equal playing talent. The practical economic problem is that professional sport leagues form imperfectly competitive natural cartels where games are played

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<sup>1</sup> The four majors in men's professional golf are The Masters (held at Augusta National, USA), the US PGA Championship, the US Open, and the Open Championship (held in the UK).

between teams with asymmetric market power (Vrooman, 2015). Comparisons between the economic environment of professional team sports and that of more traditional commercial businesses have been well documented by sports economists (e.g. Dobson and Goddard, 2011; Leach and Szymanski, 2015). Professional team sports are intrinsically different from other businesses, in which a firm is likely to prosper if it can eliminate competition and establish a position as a monopoly supplier (Dobson and Goddard, 2011). In sport, however, it does not pay for one team to establish such a position due to the joint nature of 'production' in sports. This is the same for LIV Golf. It needs to draw the talent away from the PGA Tour, but it also needs to draw enough of it so that there is enough talent to actually run the competition but also so that external partners (e.g. broadcasters and sponsors) will be interested in it.

It is here, for us, where things get interesting. In 2022, LIV Golf did not appear overly concerned with generating high broadcast fees and sponsorship agreements. However, they understand that they need broadcasters onboard to promote their product (CITATION, 2022). The prize money for the players is already set and is a healthy amount – far more than many would expect to earn on the PGA Tour. Indeed, the prize money for the inaugural tournament in 2022 was set at \$250m. Most of this is just 'base fees' as well with big bonuses on offer linked to the team element of the competition. Some reports suggest that up to \$2billion has been invested into LIV Golf so far from the PIF (Killingstad, 2022) and this figure may rise in the future. This is, of course, the biggest pull for the players. However, the economic impact to the competition organiser is less clear and there is certainly a suggestion that the organisers do not want or need the money.

In terms of the money being put into LIV Golf (which is presumably being funded directly by the PIF), there are some parallels here to other sports in relation to investment models. Most

notably, perhaps, we have seen a similar concept in ownership in football. The most high-profile examples here are probably Roman Abramovich at Chelsea Football Club and the Abu Dhabi Group at Manchester City FC. Abramovich's takeover of Chelsea in 2003 was the first big foreign investment move in English football and it has been cited as one that was linked to the notion of owning a 'trophy asset' (see Plumley and Wilson, 2018; Wilson, Plumley and Ramchandani, 2013). The money invested in by Abramovich, and any additional revenues or profits Chelsea made under his ownership was irrelevant. The owner investment was focussed on the 'trophy asset'. Indeed, many have viewed the takeover of Manchester City by the Abu Dhabi Group in 2008 in a similar light although this has now arguably moved on somewhat to investment beyond the trophy asset with the formation of the City Football Group and multi-club ownership across the globe. However, the concept of owning a 'trophy asset' versus the concept of 'sportwashing' is one that we suggest is worthy of exploration. Is 'sportwashing' just another term for 'trophy asset' hunting in alternative markets? For us, there is some connection between the way Abramovich operated at Chelsea FC (2003 – 2022) and how the PIF are operating with LIV Golf. Money does not appear to be the central driver, if it is even a driver at all. It is about much more than that. However, whilst money might not be a problem, and LIV Golf does not need money coming in from sponsors and broadcasters to pay the prize fees, it is important that the competition gets eyes on screens and stimulates interest given our 'trophy asset' concept discussed above.

There appears to be broadcasters (DAZN and Sky Deutschland for example) that are willing to back this fledgling project (see Ross, 2022) but the big money has not come in from broadcasters just yet and it may well be that the competition is loss making from an organiser's perspective for the first few years of its operation. What this also does, is leads us away from the traditional economic models of sport we have seen in the past and into something different.



For example, LIV Golf has also been referred to as a breakaway league. Yet a breakaway league has benefits for the players, clubs and broadcasters and sponsors. Again here, we are covering old ground as much as new ground. Breakaway leagues are not a new concept. The English Premier League (football) broke away from the old First Division in 1992 and the Rugby League Super League was formed not long afterward in 1995 as a breakaway league concept in rugby league (see Falcous, 1998; Parnell et al, 2022). Yet, these breakaways were driven by collective influence, with all clubs agreeing that a new competition structure was required. The modern day ‘breakaway’ or ‘super league’ concept is quite different and driven by individual clubs as opposed to collective action. In some way this explains why we haven’t seen a significant breakaway in the last few years. They have always been talked about and threatened in power struggles between leagues and clubs but have never formally materialised as an actual concept. Again, most of the narrative here relates to football but there are also a further few interesting breakaway league concepts that we will consider in relation to other sports such as cricket, golf, even horseracing.

The European Super League (ESL) idea in football drew interest from American investment banking giant JPMorgan Chase, who were said to be willing to offer around \$4billion in debt finance to get the competition up and running (Panja and Das, 2021). In doing so, they could see the benefit further down the line for them in terms of increased broadcasting and sponsorship deals. The American model of professional team sports is one that normally has a financial return on investment firmly in mind. However, there does not appear to be the same motive with LIV Golf. The whole operation is being underwritten by the PIF who already have phenomenal wealth. Return on investment might not necessarily be the motive here.

However, the PIF have found some leverage in golf that is similar to the battle ground of the ESL versus UEFA (the governing body of European football). Part of the argument of the breakaway clubs is that UEFA are creating a monopoly over European football as they govern the sport, their own flagship competition (the UEFA Champions League), control the broadcast rights for these tournaments etc. The clubs argue that there is a conflict of interest here and that there should be more open competition in European football for other parties to get involved (e.g. to create a rival league/tournament). The same battle ground exists in golf with PGA Tour. They have not had a major rival as a competitor since the European Tour in the 1990s, and part of the argument from LIV Golf is that this is unfair on the sport and the players who should be allowed more choice in where they play and how much they earn. From a competition design perspective and a wider sport economics viewpoint, they have a point, but this has just been viewed by many as a smokescreen to further legitimise the actions taken by LIV Golf and many see the only reason and motive to be further evidence of 'sportwashing' which is a term that has grown in prominence in recent years and has predominantly been aimed at Middle East countries.

### **Sportswashing and Soft Power**

The term 'sportwashing', or 'sportswashing', is a relatively new term. It was primarily defined by organisations such as Amnesty International and Sport for Right as 'an attempt by a government to distract from its human rights record with prestigious sponsorship and hosting of events'. Sportswashing, as a concept, is inextricably linked to 'soft power' (Nye, 1990). In short, Nye defined soft power as the ability to achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion. Soft power is linked to, and bound up with, states' public diplomacy and image management strategies, and was originally positioned from a North American (USA) perspective by Nye (1990; 2004). Soft power is a much-used term in current day international

relations (Bonora, 2020; MacDonald, 2020a) and has been explored extensively in academia in the twenty-first century; however, (Grix et al., 2015: 463) acknowledged the slow emergence of the concept in sports studies and literature before it became 'in vogue' in the 2010s.

Soft power has been used in academic discourse linked to events such as the 1934 FIFA World Cup in Italy and the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics, where leaders Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler used a sporting mega event to promote fascism (Mussolini) and showcase Nazi Germany and ideals of racial supremacy and antisemitism (see Crouch, 2002; Freeman, 2012; Fruh et al, 2022; Godsell, 1990; Gordon and London, 2006; Shirley and Wight, 2002). This advanced in towards research exploring twenty-first century sporting international and mega events from the 2006 Asian Games (Attali, 2006) and 2006 FIFA World Cup (Grix and Brannagan, 2016) onwards. Particular focus has been placed on the 2008 Beijing Olympics, 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup in Russia (Grix and Kramareva, 2017; ), 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil and subsequent 2016 Olympics in Rio De Janeiro (CITATION), 2016 UCI Road Cycling World Championships (Koch, 2018), and extensive research has been invested into the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, due to the nature of the bidding process and the disruption to the majority of the national league structures with the tournament taking place in November and December 2022 as opposed to its traditional typical position in the summer months (June – August).

Linked to the successful Qatari 2022 FIFA World Cup bid, and a number of sports hosting international events in the Persian (Arabian) Gulf, Grix et al. (2015) placed significance on the increasing discussion of soft power in the context of the so-called emerging nation-states. Koch (2018) asserted this point, when stating that leaders in the Arabian Peninsula have increasingly sought to host globalized sporting events to broadcast a cosmopolitan and modern image of the

region. These efforts are typically interpreted as examples of states exercising 'soft power'. Linking Eisinger (2000), Koch (2018) highlighted how state and city planners (primarily in cities such as Abu Dhabi, Doha, Dubai, and Manama) have sought to craft their cities as sporting hubs and cater to a sports-oriented 'visitor class' while advancing an image of the region as a place of wealth and supreme luxury. Often these projects have entailed significant infrastructure investment. As in many contexts explored by this body of research, the Gulf Arab states' leaders pursuing event-focused boosterism are concerned with fostering a positive image of their countries and cities.

It is clear that Nye's (1990; 2004) soft power approach has been utilised extensively since the early 2010s, clearly enabling sports scholars to provide some key insights into sport events, sport diplomacy and international relations. However, many scholars in the field believe that Nye's concept poses a number of problems. Grix et al. (2015) highlighted the minimal agreement on what it is, whether and under what conditions either social capital or soft power can be created and maintained and if they actually have the impact on society and affairs that actors believe they have. Grix and Brannagan (2016: 256) explained that many have raised concerns in four main areas. Firstly, what soft power actually is and, more specifically, whether it is merely another buzzword for conceptualising that of nation branding and/or place marketing. Secondly, that many have suggested that Nye fails to deliver a clear description of how one actually acquires "soft power" or forms of attraction, leading to a highly confusing and problematic concept with which to work. Thirdly, due to Nye's reliance on discussions of the West, many equate soft power as being either too structural or Western-centric. Fourth, that the potential pitfalls for any state that attempts to acquire soft power forms. For Koch (2018), the literature analysing soft power also tends to mischaracterise the nature of power itself, treating it as something that is 'held' or 'wielded' – as if it is an object with a discrete or

discernible essence that states choose to employ or not. Seeking to readdress these deficiencies in Nye's concept, Grix and Brannagan's (2016) analysis sought to redresses the concepts limitations in part by: setting out tangible areas in which states acquire soft power; offering empirical examples of real-life cases to show what soft power acquisition looks like in practice; and using a non-Western case study (Qatar) to illustrate that soft power transcends geographical localities. Jarvie (2021) moved away from utilising soft power and focused on cultural relations

as – I DON'T THINK WE NEED TO DEVELOP THIS POINT.

Other scholars have utilised the concept of sportswashing to advance Nye's concept of soft power due to the limitations outlined above by the likes of Grix and Brannagan (2016) and Koch (2018) and the multiple re-conceptualisations or understandings of the concept in fields outside of mainstream/traditional politics (see Grix et al., 2015). The term sportswashing rose to the forefront of sport politics in the late 2010s, primarily due to the rise in nations with questionable human rights records hosting a variety of international sporting events (see Al Thani, 2021, Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016, Delgado, 2016, Koch, 2018, Mikhaylova, 2021, Schausteck et al, 2014). Though a very contemporary term, recognised initially in academia by the likes of Chadwick (2018a; 2018b; 2022), sportswashing has been used for over a century in modern sporting events (see Bohdan, 2022) and has term a 'new word for an old idea' (Menon, 2019). According to Schad (2022), sportswashing, for world leaders, it is a way to improve their nation's reputation by hosting a prestigious sporting event or financing a popular team. Similar to Sport for Right's element of sportswashing being a 'distraction', Chadwick (2022) believes the concept relies on 'diversion', namely from a variety of human rights issues that may be occurring in said country (also see McGillivray, 2020). However, as Chadwick (2018a) has highlighted, there is a dearth of academic research on the concept, and that the term has been used to liberally and simplistically by western countries. Fruh et al (2022)

have added to the contemporary discourse regarding sportswashing with their recent discussion into the nature of sportswashing, the distinctive wrongs of sportswashing, and when examining how sportswashing ought to be resisted. However, the term remained on the periphery of media circles (particularly western media circles) until LIV Golf fully emerged in Spring 2022. It is here that the term has very much been outlined to the mainstream public audience.

## **LIV Golf**

There has been widespread media coverage of the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund's (PIF) expansion in the world of men's professional golf via a new exhibition known as LIV Golf (see Beall and Rapaport, 2022; Curtis, 2022; Heath, 2022; Kershaw, 2022; Morrison and Johnson, 2022; Lauletta, 2022; Lynch, 2022; Mathurin et al, 2022; Porath and Johnson, 2022; Porter, 2022; Shackelford, 2022; Van Valkenburg, 2022). LIV, which in roman numerals equals 54, refers to the number of holes that the professionals have to play in each of the LIV Golf tournaments to complete each Invitational Event. Presented as an individual and team event, that will be 'golf but louder', a number of heralded male professional golfers have defected from the number one professional golf tour, the PGA Tour, to join LIV Golf for astronomical signing on fees, and the chance to win up to \$4m per event, the largest prize in the sport of golf (Lu, 2022). With no sponsors or broadcasters for the initial exhibition events, this has been widely reported as an overt form of sportswashing in global media outlets across the world and has led to the PGA Tour banning all professional players who play in the LIV events from their tour (Casey, 2022; Schlabach, 2022a).

### **GOLF BUT LOUDER - LIV IMAGE**

The management structure of PIF and LIV Golf is critical to this narrative being presented in the media and in particular Western media outlets. Yasir Al-Rumayyan is a Saudi businessman

who is Governor of the Public Investment Fund (PIF), the sovereign wealth fund of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Al-Rumayyan is the Chairman of state-owned petroleum company Saudi Aramco and serves as the chairman of English Premier League football club Newcastle United, who the PIF (supported by private equity investor Amanda Staveley, her husband Mehrdad Ghodoussi and the Reuben Brothers) purchased from Mike Ashley in October 2021 (Olley, 2021). PIF is chaired by Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the son of the King of Saudi Arabia. Bin Salman runs the government and has been accused of ordering the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was critical of the Saudi government (Kirchgaessner, 2021). Because of the PIF's links to the Saudi Government, LIV Golf has faced accusations of sportswashing. When questioned as to whether the LIV Golf by BBC News reporter Dan Roan (2022) at the LIV Golf London event, Al-Rumayyan was dismissive of the term stating that he did not understand the terminology:

Roan: There have been criticisms of the [LIV Golf] tournament, with suggestions of sportswashing?

Al-Rumayyan: I'm not really sure about this terminology.

Although the media have widely described the LIV Golf tour as sportswashing, it was evident that Al-Rumayyan did not want to engage in any discourse about the term or the media's assertions. The CEO of LIV Golf, two-time major champion Greg Norman, has denied claims that the league is part of a Saudi sportswashing campaign. This is despite the fact that the league is primarily funded by the Saudi Arabian government's investment arm, the PIF. Norman had tried to develop a world tour in the 1990s but was unsuccessful at luring players away from the PGA Tour and European Tour (Hall, 2021). However, this time around, it appears to be a different story. A number of male professional golfers have already been convinced to leave

the PGA Tour in 2022. When asked about the Saudi government's reported human rights issues, Norman was dismissive about the Saudi government or their involvement in the LIV Golf tour:

'I don't know what the Saudi government does. I don't want to get into that...they're not my bosses. We're independent. I do not answer to Saudi Arabia'. Norman also downplayed Khashoggi's murder: 'Everybody has owned up to it, right?' 'Look, we've all made mistakes and you just want to learn from those mistakes and how you can correct them going forward.' (Greg Norman, in conversation with Jamie Weir, Sky Sports, 2022).

As an exhibition based limited field event, with financial incentive being the main reward presented to the players, many golfers joining the LIV Golf tour praised the regime. This included 2010 US Open champion, the Northern Irishman, Graeme McDowell, who stated: 'if Saudi Arabia wanted to use the game of golf as a way for them to get to where they want to be and they have the resources to accelerate that experience, I think we are proud to help them on that journey' (see Morse, 2022). It became evident to many in the sport that the professional golfers who defected to the LIV tour for large sums of money were ready to support the Saudi Arabian legitimacy push in global sport.

LIV Golf claimed that its goal is to "holistically improve the health of professional golf" and "help unlock the sport's untapped potential" (LIV Golf, 2022). But critics say the league is part of a broader political effort by Saudi Arabia to buy legitimacy and polish its global image. There are a number of reasons that the professional players have presented as motivations to join LIV Golf in various press conferences at the launch events in London and Portland. These ranged from being able to spend time with family; autonomy of playing schedule; the PGA Tour not listening to the players; a change in opinion about the exhibition events; the ability to



play more team golf; and the opportunity to grow the game, amongst other reasons (Huggan, 2022b). At the first LIV Golf Invitational in London, very few players based their motivations around financial remuneration. Many within the sports media and some of the professional golfers who have not defected have identified, including the likes of four-time major champion, Rory McIlroy claimed players were defecting for boat loads of cash (Keogh, 2022). Since widespread backlash from various media outlets and fans on social media after the LIV Golf London and Portland events, some of the golfers and broadcasters have framed their defection to the LIV Tour as a ‘business decision’ based upon finances, not wanting to play golf for the rest of their lives, or to support external golf business projects (Chivers, 2022).

Whilst sportswashing can be termed a diversion, it is also a legitimisation strategy (see Al Khalifa and Farrello, 2020). Creating sports events in this manner helps to provide leaders or regimes regular international events that gain acceptance into the higher echelons of sport. Bin Salman introduced *Vision 2030*, a blueprint to diminish Saudi Arabia’s reliance on oil by diversifying the economy and modernising its public services (Beall and Rapaport, 2022). One of Vision 2030’s key tenets is a ‘vibrant society’, and a way to reach this ambition has been via professional sport. As alluded to earlier in this article, their strategy has focused on hosting a number of sporting events including high profile boxing matches, its own Formula 1 Grand Prix, and even wrestling events created by the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) (see Sajad, 2022). This is similar to gulf neighbours such as United Arab Emirates and Qatar. However, the creation of the LIV Golf has been the biggest and most controversial events to date in their continued strategy of promoting the country on the sporting world stage.

### **LIV Golf vs the PGA Tour/DP World Tour**

Since the emergence of the legendary American golfer Tiger Woods in the mid-1990s, the PGA Tour has marketed itself as the leading global professional golf tour. They have created several events across the world worth millions of dollars in prize money for the professional golfers. They have hosted events in countries with questionable human rights records and have sought to diminish the rival tour, the European Tour (now known as the DP World Tour) by attracting all of the European and world players to the PGA Tour, diluting the quality of field in the DP World Tour events.

With the emergence of LIV Golf, it is clear that elite men's professional golf is now fragmented. Increasing number of elite players are leaving the PGA Tour to join LIV Golf. During the 2022 season, over 30 of the top 100 ranked players in the world, including 11 major champions, had defected to LIV Golf. As we have previously stated in an earlier section, this is not uncommon in professional sports. Across history, organisations have created new tournaments or formats that has led athletes to defect or to set up rival tours, in sports such as IndyCar Racing, Cricket (World Series of Cricket), Rugby League in Australia, and professional darts (BDO and PDC) (see Chaplin, 2009; Davis, 2018; Haigh, 2013; Maguire et al, 2005; Oreovicz, 2021). In professional darts, the best players in the world left to create the PDC. However, in men's professional golf, as of August 2022, the best in the world have remained with the dominant tour (the PGA Tour).

There can be accusations of hypocrisy linked to the outrage regarding the LIV Golf tour. The Saudi government have funded the Saudi Invitational on the DP World Tour since 2019, and the state-owned petroleum company Saudi Aramco have sponsored Ladies International and Team Series since 2020, with very little coming their way by the way of complaints (Dalleres, 2022). Rory McIlroy, as one of the leading players on the PGA Tour, has recognised that the

Saudi influence has been in golf for some time, acknowledging the Aramco Ladies Series and advocating for the Saudi influence to be invested into the existing structures rather than their own separate tour (BBC Sport, 2022). Also, the PGA Tour created PGA TOUR CHINA as part of their global expansion in 2014 to encourage the development of Chinese players who intended to progress to the major international tours, and to help accelerate the development of golf in the People's Republic of China, a country with a variety of human rights issues (see Altvater, 2013; Smith, 2022) and a nation known for hosting many sports mega events in the twenty first century, including the 2008 Summer Olympics and Paralympics and 2022 Winter Olympic and Paralympics (Chen and Zheng, 2018). The moral high ground might be being taken now, but there is a question of why now and why firmly directed at LIV Golf that remains unanswered.

The PGA Tour, using the fame and successes of the likes of Tiger Woods and six-time major champion Phil Mickelson, became the singularly dominant tour in men's professional golf in the twenty-first century. The PGA Tour have saturated the market across the calendar year, culminating in a lucrative FedEx Playoff series that leads to a \$10m first prize alongside other awards. This left rival tours such as the European Tour to essentially become inferior or 'feeder' tours. From the early 2000s, a number European players began to base themselves in the United States to primarily focus on the PGA Tour. The notion of other tours being termed as 'feeder' tours has been further exacerbated with significant changes to the Official World Golf Ranking (OWGR) points system which is now skewed heavily in favour of the PGA Tour events having significantly more points than other tours across the globe (Hall, 2022). There have been criticisms of the PGA Tour structure and setup in the way that the tour was becoming both bloated and stagnant with no real competitor tour, and being predominantly based in the USA, rarely holding events in other continents across the globe.

The rapid emergence of LIV Golf, as a rival tour, has led to the PGA Tour making significant changes to their own structure and amending their tournaments in a manner that places more interest on their signature heritage events (Beall and Rapaport, 2022). These changes have been fast-tracked due to the clear threat from LIV. However, this has been offset by the continued exodus of a number of high-profile professional golfers to LIV Golf. LIV have been very strategic in the way they have announced a number of different players joining their tour at key moments in the golf season. The most significant defection to the LIV tour was the Australian golfer Cameron Smith in September 2022 (Morgan and Corrigan, 2022). Smith's 2022 season was stellar – after winning the *Sentry Tournament of Champions* in January, he won the one of the flagship events on the PGA Tour, the PLAYERS Championship in March. Smith dramatically won one of men's golf's four major tournaments, the *Open Championship* at the Old Course, St Andrews, Scotland in July rising to a career high ranking of World Number 2 following the win (CITATION, 2022). Smith was the highest ranked player to leave the PGA Tour, and, as a new major champion, he was seen to be defecting from the PGA to LIV Golf at the peak of his career. It is notable that many of the international players from South Africa, Australia and Great Britain have moved to the LIV tour, leaving the PGA Tour to be dubbed the 'American Tour' (Porath and Johnson, 2022).



Australian Cameron Smith and USA's Dustin Johnson during a LIV trophy presentation  
(Lynne Sladky, Associated Press)

LIV Golf is ready to spend a reported \$3bn to advance their professional sports league as a long-term project (Polychronis, 2022). It is paying players guaranteed money via a contract – the PGA Tour does not provide signing-on contracts to players. Alongside the other professional golf tours across the globe, the PGA Tour is a meritocracy (Dixon, 2021), in which success depends on ability and effort, and is remunerated via prize earnings. Whilst the majority of professional sports have guaranteed contracts, individual sports such as golf and tennis do not have base money for players to survive upon. Therefore, it can be argued that the PGA Tour has left itself 'open' to players being poached by not providing guaranteed money. This has led to the PGA Tour and the DP World Tour providing their members with guaranteed money in the 2023 season - \$500,000 on the PGA Tour and \$150,000 on the DP World Tour (CITATION, 2022; CITATION, 2022).

When the LIV players gained their contracts, they indicated that they also want to compete in PGA Tour events (as the PGA events command the most OWGR ranking points as explained above). The OWGR rankings, alongside tournament win exemptions, gains the players access to the four men's major tournaments. As the LIV Golfers did not receive world-ranking points for where they finished in LIV events in 2022, they have begun to 'plummet' in the OWGR rankings, which puts those without previously earned exemptions into the four men's majors in danger of not competing in 2023 or 2024 (see Schlabach, 2022b). This has resulted in a number of legal cases being launched by a number of LIV golfers, with an initial victory in the first case for the PGA Tour (Beall, 2022) against the golfers who have moved to the LIV tour but now want to return to compete in the PGA Tour events.

This is just the beginning of a long road in the battle for elite men's professional golf. The senior management at LIV Golf have stated that the LIV tour has not fully started. They say this will begin in 2023 when LIV transitions from a series of invitational tournaments in 2022 to a 14-event league (Rapaport, 2022). During 2023's 14-tournament schedule, LIV golfers will compete for \$405m – which is \$150m more than they did in the 2022 LIV Golf season (Schlabach, 2022b). LIV Golf plans to have a 60-man roster, with four active players and one reserve on each team. The plan is for all of the teams to be confirmed and remain consistent throughout the 2023 season (Rapaport, 2022).

As the LIV tour expands, they aim to gain further legitimacy, but the exhibition is lacking credibility at present. For LIV to be a reputable tour and gain OWGR points, they will need to adapt their format if they want to even be eligible. A 48-person, 54-hole shotgun start exhibition event does not meet the criteria at present. For a men's golf tour to gain consistent OWGR points, there needs to be a minimum of 75 players in a tournament, and 72 holes needs to fully completed by all of the final day competitors (see Sens, 2022). Without being able to offer

OWGR points, many believe that the LIV Golf tour will remain a relative outlier on the global golf stage (Shedloski, 2022). LIV Golf will be a financially lucrative tour for the players, but, for the foreseeable future (pending their OWGR application), will provide limited opportunities for the players to compete in the men's four major tournaments.

LIV do not have a significant television contract at present. The LIV events are being streamed for free on media channels such as YouTube and Facebook, to very low numbers in comparison to PGA Tour events. The estimated viewing figures show that on YouTube, the intrigue diminished rapidly as LIV's 2022 season reached its climax, going from 104,000 viewers on average at the first event, LIV London, to just over 40,000 viewers at the finale event at LIV Miami (Cooper, 2022). As a comparison, one of the standard PGA Tour events, the Canadian Open, averaged 2.78 million viewers, peaking at 3.67 million viewers in the final round (see Dixon, 2022). The PGA Tour has just entered a lucrative nine-year contract with major networks including NBC, CBS, ESPN and Sky Sports, starting in 2022 and ending in 2030 (Draper, 2020; Sky Sports, 2022). If the LIV tour can attract significant broadcasting rights, from the likes of FOX or international networks in Australia or South Africa, this would further increase the legitimacy of the LIV Golf tour. It is evident that, alongside the legal cases that will continue over the next 2-3 years, that the OWGR ranking points, television contracts and sponsorship are critical to the future of men's professional golf. But at present, the top of the elite professional golf structure has two diluted products: a weakened PGA Tour, with diminishing fields, and a 3-day exhibition tour, with a closed field and limited exposure.

### **Concluding comments**

In this article, we provided discourse that presents and critiques the issues at play in men's professional golf following the launch of LIV Golf and the accusations of sportswashing. We

are aware that we are merely scratching the surface here with the LIV Golf tour still in its infancy, and its further expansion in 2023 (The Guardian, 2022). As such, we encourage researchers to consider this manuscript and what it might mean for future research in the field.

There are two emergent pillars that link directly to this paper; the ongoing governance struggles in men's professional golf; and the stimulation of further interdisciplinary study in the world of professional sport that considers economic power and governance dynamics in an interconnected world. For the former, qualitative analysis approaches would be useful with key stakeholders in the sport, including governing bodies, competition organisers, broadcasters, event hosts, players, and fans. For the latter, the research agenda is extensive. It is likely that we will see more of these types of competitions start-up in other sports around the world with a number of different actors at play and future research will be able to explore these in more detail when they arise. There are also secondary areas of exploration, that sit outside the primary scope of this paper but are worthy of consideration in other discipline areas. These include sport events more generally and in particular the fan experience at the event that not only considers the sport in question but the social aspects of event experiences for consumers.

There is a lot that is new with LIV Golf and Saudi Arabia's push for legitimacy on the sporting stage but there is also a lot that we have seen before. The concept of 'sportwashing' remains a new one in academic discourse but we have seen variations of it in the past through the use of owning professional sport teams as 'trophy assets' (e.g. Chelsea FC and Roman Abramovich) and through the leveraging of major sporting events to promote countries in a positive light (e.g. China and Qatar). With regards to received sport economic theory, LIV Golf is looking to break new ground by taking an individual sport and attempting to bring in a team and league element to it. Breakaway leagues are becoming and more common concept in professional sport, but this is certainly the biggest and most controversial we have seen so far.



The most important factor in this is around legitimacy. LIV Golf have different strategies they are using to gain legitimacy; recruiting more top-ranked OWGR players to defect to the LIV Tour; a TV deal gain to gain exposure and higher viewing figures; LIV players competing in the four majors in the 2023 and 2024 season and challenging for the four major titles (which could render the OWGR as obsolete). The PIF are attempting here to build legitimacy on a global scale and the impact on the golf tour itself could be profound. The game of gold could change substantially in the future because of this movement. Indeed, there may even be some positives to this that are yet to be considered. There has been talk recently of governing bodies holding monopoly control over certain sports. The fallout between the European governing body of football (UEFA) and the clubs that attempted to breakaway and form the European Super League (ESL) is a good example of this. In golf, the same could be said of the PGA. There has never been any direct competitor to the PGA and as such they have held monopoly control over golf. This has just become accepted as the status quo.

The LIV Golf competition may be controversial, but it perhaps posing some positives in respect of shaking up the sport of men's professional golf and has provided players with an alternative platform in which to compete. In fact, there could be many positives from the two bodies coalescing and existing in the same space. It could, in a way, create more competition that will benefit the sport in the future. Future research in this space should perhaps consider the positives of this. Future research could also consider the reasons for the Saudi/PIF investment into the Aramco Ladies Series and the former DP World Tour event, the *Saudi International*, and the consider some of the fan perspectives on the LIV Golf tour from those attending LIV events and those attending PGA Tour or DP World Tour events.

Such positives might be on the periphery of thinking at present as the narrative continues to be around 'sportswashing' and the push for legitimacy by Saudi Arabia in the world of sport. The impact for men's professional golf could be profound if the LIV Golf competition continues to gather pace in the coming years. The impact on wider society and the concept of 'sportswashing' remains to be seen but there is little doubt that the Middle East push to become a major player in the global sporting arena continues to mobilise and is here to stay.

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