

## **Unpacking the Concept of Sportswashing in Elite Men's Professional Football in England**

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# **Unpacking the concept of sportswashing in elite men's professional football in England**

*Leon Davis and Daniel Plumley*

## **Introduction**

As a concept, 'sportswashing' is one of the most recent concepts to abruptly enter the political, media and popular lexicon, similar to 'social capital' and 'soft power' before it. As a result, in many ways, it is nothing new. Just a rebrand of a concept that has been around for centuries. The term also has geographical resonance, mostly being reserved for use in narrative relating to influence in sport from outside the Western world. One of the highest profile examples of this is the takeover of Newcastle United Football Club by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF) in 2021. In this chapter, we explore the concept of 'sportswashing' in relation to elite men's professional football in England. In doing so, we put forward an argument of nuance in the concept, further supporting our point that it is nothing new. It is also never just one thing in isolation. To understand the concept of 'sportswashing' and its relevance in elite men's professional football in England, we must also consider the wider landscape of the sport and beyond, including financial incentives, ownership motives, global exposure, and the leveraging opportunity. Any concept of 'sportswashing' is often bigger than the sport itself and we must be aware of the bigger picture story at play. We will return to this later in the chapter citing examples throughout history to support our case, but first we must attempt to understand the terminology in more detail.

## **Sportswashing advancing from soft power**

As a concept, sportswashing is inextricably linked to 'soft power', a term popularised by Joseph Nye in western circles in the late twentieth century. Nye (1990; 2004; 2021) 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. Soft power is a popular term within current day international relations (Bonora, 2020; MacDonald, 2020) and has been explored extensively in academia in the twenty-first century.

Scholars have utilised the concept of sportswashing to advance Nye's concept of soft power due to the limitations outlined 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). As highlighted by Skey (2023), sportswashing is a neologism that has begun to appear with increasing regularity in the English-language media over the past few years. The term 'sportswashing' rose to the forefront of sport politics in the mid to late 2010s, primarily due to the rise in nations with questionable human rights records hosting a variety of international sporting events (see Akhundova, 2015; Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016; Delgado, 2016; Koch, 2018; Schausteck et al., 2014). It became a contemporary term in the late 2010s, recognised initially in academia by the likes of Chadwick (2018a; 2018b; 2022), but sportswashing has been used for over a century in modern sporting events (see Rosenberg, 2022) and has also been labelled as a 'new word for an old idea' (Menon, 2019). According to Dubinsky (2023a, p. 157) the use of sport for nation branding and public diplomacy goes 'back to antiquity, not only to the city-states and the athletic competitions in Olympia, in Ancient Greece, but also through the conquests of Alexander the Great'. Boykoff (2022, p. 342), when highlighting the lack of definition of the term in scholarly literature, defined sportswashing as 'a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front'.

Schad (2022) asserted that 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, 2022). There have been a number of definitions of the term - and although 'sportswashing' lacks an agreed upon definition, it has become to be a way to criticise typically non-democratic regimes or large corporations for using investment in world-renowned athletes, sports clubs, and sports events to detract from illiberal, non-democratic, and/or exploitative practices in their home countries or businesses (see Ettinger, 2023; Grix et al., 2023). Chadwick (2018a) highlighted the dearth of academic research on sportswashing, and that the term has been used to liberally and simplistically by western countries. As the world emerged from the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, the interest in sportswashing in academia has increased significantly (c.f. Boykoff, 2022; Davis et al., 2023; Dubinsky, 2023a, 2023b; Ettinger, 2023; Fruh et al., 2022; Grix et al., 2023; Jephson, 2023; Kearns et al., 2023; Skey, 2023).

Skey (2023) outlined how sportswashing has only been used a pejorative term, much like propaganda, to call into question the activities of those hosting the events, which is in direct contrast to cognate terms, such as soft power or public diplomacy, which are often portrayed as the legitimate actions of states even if they are not viewed as successful. Up until now, it has only been applied to a narrow range of state actors, all of whom are based outside of the Western World. However, we should also question whether or not some of the actors in the Western World have held similar desires to the arguments linked to sportswashing. This links to the nuance in the term and Menon's (2019) label of sportswashing as a 'new word for an old

idea'. Is it really that different as a concept and has it only been a strategy deployed in the East?

We now turn our attention to English football and a brief history lesson.

### **English football and sportswashing**

Although the term (and concept) of sportswashing became vogue when abruptly entering the sporting landscape in the mid-2010s (see Grix et al., 2023; Skey, 2023) the antecedents of the term, as a separate entity to soft power or social capital, can be traced back a little further into the early 2000s, with particular reference to key events in the history of men's football in England. Such events include Roman Abramovich's purchase of Chelsea FC in 2003; the FIFA 2006 World Cup in Germany; and Sheikh Mansour's takeover of Manchester City FC in 2008. When we consider the context of the takeovers at Chelsea (2003) and Manchester City (2008) we arrive at a bigger picture of ownership motives and, ultimately, finance. There has been considerable literature published on the economics and finance of professional team sport and how the professional sport ecosystem continues to hold an allure for investors linked to broadcasting rights contracts, sponsorship opportunities and the ability to target a global audience (see Plumley and Wilson, 2022). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine all of these things in detail: but we must be aware that sport holds significant power for investors for a multitude of reasons. A key word in this debate is 'leverage'. Many actors in the sport investment network are looking for leverage just as much as they are looking for the acquisition. In the context of 'sportswashing' we have already defined some of this leveraging earlier in this chapter linked to human rights issues in certain territories. However, leveraging is not a term exclusive to these territories. All owners of football clubs are looking for some form of leverage and often that leverage is financial. Put simply, despite the morals and ethics involved, it often comes down to money, and who has the most money.

We can see this laid bare in Kearns et al. (2023) discussion of the investment based sportswashing methodology. Kearns et al. argued that western powers have utilised a concept similar to sportswashing in the past. We could argue that this is similar to our notion of leverage cited above: the challenge in the early 2020s was that the financial power of these western actors was dwarfed by eastern counterparts. This created a powerful leveraging argument for investors linked to the emotional aspect of football fans. Many fans began to crave state investment in order to see their team compete at the top table. Put simply, they didn't care where the money was coming from, as long as it was more money than the previous owners had. The Glazer family takeover of Manchester United FC in 2005, the Mike Ashley based takeover of Newcastle United FC in 2007, and to a lesser extent, Tom Hicks and George Gillett's takeover of Liverpool FC in 2007 set a precedent which, in essence, made certain fans conclude that to compete at the top of elite club football, state-based ownership was the only option. This was noticeable in the fan reaction to the PIF's takeover of Newcastle United FC in 2021 and the urge for Sheikh Jassim's (Qatar) ultimately failed takeover of Manchester United FC in 2023 (see Jones et al., 2023; Mehta and Gillespie, 2021). However, it must be noted that some supporters' groups were still averse to state-based ownership (see Jackson, 2023).

We cannot ignore the importance of fans in this argument and the power of fan experiences of different takeovers shaping the narrative. Responses are often mixed, adding further nuance to the debate. Whilst Kearns et al.'s (2023) study is admirable, it is framed solely around one club (Manchester City FC). Focusing on a team at the zenith of their powers, when the strategy implemented has fully come to fruition, with Manchester City's men's team winning *The Treble* (UEFA Champions League, Premier League, FA Cup) in 2023 can lead to a skewed opinion of the ethics of the ownership model and any concept of sportswashing. For Kearns et

al. (2023), most research (to the time of their publication being released), had focused on one-off event-based sportswashing strategies (such as autocratic states hosting major international sports events) rather than longer term investment-based strategies (such as state actors purchasing sports clubs and teams). However, this shows a lack of consideration of the sports world in the early 2020s, linked to the long term investment strategies by the likes of the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF) into the likes of Newcastle United FC (comparable to the Abu Dhabi [United Arab Emirates] funded Manchester City FC, but at an earlier stage in the process), and men's professional golf (see Chen and Doran, 2022; Davis et al., 2023; Davis and Plumley, 2023; Ettinger, 2023; Jephson, 2023; Taylor, Burdsey and Jarvis, 2022).

### **The bigger picture**

We close out this chapter by returning to our point of the bigger picture at play. Sportswashing rose to prominence as a concept in the late 2010s but in many ways, it is merely a term that creates a diversion. As Al-Khalifa and Farrello (2020) point out, it is also a legitimisation strategy. If we accept this notion, and ditch the terminology, then geography also becomes irrelevant. The country with which the concept of sportswashing is linked to becomes immaterial. Instead, we should focus on the term of legitimacy and consider the drivers of wealth, money and finance. It goes above football or sport: it is about something much bigger.

There is no doubt that the term sportswashing has become a popular phrase, but we question its analytical value. The term creates a geopolitical narrative of something that is non-Western and negative. There is also no agreed definition of the term. If we switch from the concept to the strategy it becomes about legitimacy. If we lift our heads up further still, it becomes about the money. Whilst the western media tend to highlight sportswashing as a negative towards the

likes of the UAE, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, it is evident that these states do not care what people think of their strategies.

In 2023, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, said that he does not care about allegations of "sportswashing" against the kingdom and that he will continue funding sport if it adds to the country's gross domestic product (GDP). Having stated that he has a 1% increase in GDP due to sport (in 2023), Bin Salman said that they are aiming for more in the future, when saying 'Call it whatever you want - we are going to get that 1.5%' (see Sankar, 2023). In the case of Saudi Arabia, they have a goal which is much bigger than football, but football is a good leverage towards the achievement of that goal. In 2023, the PIF invested over £3 billion (\$3.6 billion/€3.4 billion) into the Saudi Pro League (SPL), taking over four domestic football clubs - Al-Ahli, Al-Hilal, Al-Ittihad and Al-Nassr – in the process (see Choukeir and Saba, 2023). The investment in football is linked to a bigger picture for the Kingdom, titled 'Vision 2030'. The wider picture for the vision is GDP.

## **Conclusion**

Whether we like it or not, the horse has bolted. We can continue to debate the concept of sportswashing, but that only serves to further the diversion tactic. It is much bigger, than the concept, and much bigger than sport. Sport is merely leveraging collateral, but a powerful one it must be said. We will continue to see more sports shifting geographically from west to east, just like we have already with football, boxing, Formula 1, golf (men's and women's) and even entertainment brands such as the WWE.

We will also likely see more investment into sport from east to west, typified by the examples cited in this chapter in relation to English football. Due to the economic success of the English Premier League, at elite level in English football, it takes billions to compete. As such, concepts

of sportswashing and even legitimacy can go out of the window. To fans, it is mostly about who has the most money and who can implement a strategy to compete at the highest level. Outgoing club owners will continue to sell to the highest bidder and fans of certain clubs are seeing state-based ownership as the best investment. Call it what you will, but it continues to mobilise and is here to stay.

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