

Sportswashing: Media headline or analytic concept?

International Review for the
Sociology of Sport
2023, Vol. 58(5) 749–764
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DOI: 10.1177/10126902221136086
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Abstract

Sportswashing is a neologism that has begun to appear with increasing regularity in the English-language media over the past few years. However, there has been limited academic discussion of the term and certainly no sustained analysis of what it might or might not offer to sports scholars. This lacuna is particularly curious given the rapid rise in interest in related issues, such as the links between sport and soft power, sporting mega events and place branding and sports diplomacy. Therefore, this paper has three main objectives. First to trace the links between sport and other forms of ‘washing’ (whitewashing, greenwashing etc) and to identify similarities and differences in these approaches. Second, to situate sportswashing within the wider literature on sports and state relations so as to better assess what, if anything, makes it different from cognate terms, including propaganda, public diplomacy, soft power and place branding. Third, to reflect on the utility of the concept, in both analytical and practical terms, in the contemporary era.

Keywords

sportswashing, public diplomacy, propaganda, soft power, nation branding

Introduction

In January 2022, it was announced in the UK media that a Saudi-backed consortium had bought the English Premier League football club, Newcastle United. The term ‘sportswashing’ appeared in many of the reports around the story, with a good number quoting an Amnesty International spokesperson that made the following claim:

Saudi Arabia is well-known for its attempts at ‘sportswashing’ - trying to use the glamour and prestige of top-tier sport as a PR tool to distract from the country’s abysmal human rights record (Independent, 28/01/22)

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Sportswashing is a neologism that has begun to appear with increasing regularity in the English-language media over the past few years. A search of the Nexis UK database indicates that the term first appeared in relation to a sporting event in 2015 when the human rights campaigner, Gulnara Akhundova, wrote an article for the UK Independent newspaper criticizing the fact that the European Games, a high-profile athletics event, were being held in Baku, Azerbaijan, despite the country's poor human rights record (Akhundova, 2015). Previous to this, the term had only been used in relation to the marketing of a deodorant and, indeed, it disappeared again for a further two years, before in 2018, sportswashing re-emerged with something of a vengeance in relation to a whole host of sporting events. These included, the hosting of a stage of the Giro D'Italia in Israel and tennis and football events in Saudi Arabia, the planned pre-season tour of Myanmar by the English football team, Leeds United, the staging of the football world cup by Russia (2018) and Qatar (2022) and the ownership of Manchester City Football Club by the Abu Dhabi United Group. In the last two years, the use of the term has skyrocketed in the English-language media, with 550 mentions in 2019 and over 800 in 2021. Outside of the mainstream media, growing recognition of the term was confirmed by its inclusion in the 2018 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.

While, sportswashing has grown in prominence across mainstream media reporting, academic interest in the term has been somewhat limited. A notable exception is Simon Chadwick, who offered the following definition in a recent paper, 'a means by which a country can deflect audiences' attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sport' (2022: 12). Jules Boykoff, who has written widely on the Olympics (2013, 2016), has also discussed the term in media interviews and the grey literature, providing a similar definition: 'using ... sports megaevents to try to launder your reputation on the world stage', (Francis, 2022). However, beyond these rather fleeting mentions, there has been no sustained attempt to understand why sportswashing has risen to prominence or how it differs from other related concepts such as soft power or sports diplomacy. Therefore, this commentary piece has three main objectives. First to trace the links between sport and other forms of 'washing', notably white and greenwashing (but also more recent debates around pink, crowd and veganwashing), and to identify similarities and differences in these approaches. Second, to situate sportswashing within the wider literature on sport and propaganda, soft power, diplomacy and place branding as a means of trying to pinpoint what it might offer compared to these cognate terms. Of particular interest, here, will be the extent to which states are increasingly operating within an integrated global political economy in which relations with elites and audiences/consumers need to be carefully managed. Then, a further set of arguments will be addressed concerning the shift towards a 'logic of branding' (Askegaard, 2006) in which digital technologies are key components in creating and bolstering reputation, including those of both institutions and places. Finally, the utility of sportswashing will be assessed, in both analytical and practical terms.

Washing as metaphor

As metaphors go, washing and, in particular, clothes' washing has had a long and productive history when it comes to foregrounding notions of deception, cover-up and distraction.

Ideas around personal probity are expressed in the ways in which people deal with their 'dirty laundry' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 307), while the term laundering has long been used in relation to the processing of 'dirty' (that is, criminally-generated) money so that it can be spent without attracting interest from the authorities (Dodd, 2005).

Whitewashing is slightly different in that it points to another work-related activity, painting, or more specifically, 'the practice of using low-cost calcium paint to superficially conceal or cover up a structural or substantive defect. Although the painter knows of its problems, a whitewashed wall appears flawless to the untrained eye' (Wexler, 2013: 825). This idea of covering-up a problem has been applied to both the political and legal spheres with Lesley Wexley arguing that a whitewash 'has three essential components: an underlying defect, an attempt to conceal the defect ... and a failure to fix the underlying defect' (Wexler, 2013: 817). It is, therefore, a term that is primarily used to describe the covering up of crimes, crises and forms of corruption involving both political and corporate actors.

In chronological terms, greenwashing comes next, and its first use is commonly attributed to an essay, written in 1986, by an American environmental campaigner, Jay Westerveld (Cherry, 2018: 5). In it, Westerveld noted how a hotel company used claims about environmental protection to encourage its patrons to use less towels, conveniently overlooking how such a policy would also save the company money through reduced labour costs.

Nowadays, greenwashing broadly refers to forms of 'communication that mislead people into forming overly positive beliefs about an organization's environmental practices or products' (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015: 223). The term gained some traction in the 1990s as environmental concerns began to rise up both socio-economic and political agendas, but its use mushroomed in the 2000s. According to Lyon and Montgomery (2015), there are now over 800 scholarly papers dealing with the topic. This research has identified a wide range of practice as well as a number of different actors that both employ, and critique, greenwashing activities.

Classifying greenwashing

In terms of classification, the literature first draws a distinction between corporate and product-level greenwashing (Marquis et al., 2016: 484). It then identifies a number of different forms, including: selective disclosure, empty claims and policies, dubious certifications, labels and voluntary programmes, endorsements and partnerships, misleading narratives and imagery (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015: 236–238) and 'deceptive manipulation' (Siano et al., 2017: 33). Some of these practices are linked very strongly with the idea of a 'cover up', as companies actively deceive consumers, competitors and regulators. For instance, Siano et al. (2017) examined the Volkswagen emissions scandal as a form of greenwashing, where the company manipulated data so as to suggest its diesel cars were meeting environmental standards. Other forms are slightly different in emphasis. They are not only more proactive, rather than reactive, but are also aimed at associating a company or product with more valued characteristics or with activities that are designed to distract or confuse, rather than necessarily cover up a specific defect. Indeed, it is these forms that, as it will be argued later, are more in line with sportswashing.

When it comes to actors, greenwashing tends to focus on the activities of corporations, but governments are also seen as important when it comes to identifying and, of course, regulating forms of greenwashing, including those that infringe rules around promotion and marketing (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015: 224). However, the literature also points to the key role of activist and civil society groups when it comes to both highlighting and challenging instances of greenwashing. In the latter case, this has involved forms of direct action in combination with ‘culture jamming’, where a company’s marketing messages and brand values are targeted, disrupted and subverted to raise awareness of its activities (Lekakis, 2017). Digital media has been seen as particularly effective in aiding such groups (Lyon and Montgomery, 2015: 236) and, as for other forms of ‘washing’, the online sphere is now seen to be a key battleground in the struggles between alleged perpetrators and their critics. This is a point that will be picked up below when trying to assess the rise, and relevance, of sportswashing.

Beyond greenwashing

With greenwashing now well established in both the academic literature and mainstream debates around environmental protection and communications, the metaphor of ‘washing’ has also been recently extended to a number of other activities and issues. These are of particular interest, here, because they are much more focused on strategies of distraction and positive association rather than concealment or deceptive manipulation. Pinkwashing is the first of these and has been applied to two quite different areas. In the first case, corporate actors have been criticized for using the pink logo of various breast cancer charities on their products when they do not actually contribute (Carter, 2015) or contribute very little to these charities (Devlin and Sheehan, 2018). However, in the academic literature, pinkwashing is most strongly associated with corporations, and to a lesser extent governments, that emphasise their support of LGTBQ people and lifestyles in order to either access the ‘pink pound’ (Elliot, 2007; Fry, 1997) or to brand themselves as tolerant, open and progressive. In the latter case, it is the state of Israel that has been subject to most scrutiny, with recent work arguing that pinkwashing is used to ‘exploit Israel’s relatively progressive stance on gay rights, and to deflect international attention from its gross violations of human rights and international law’ (Shafie, 2015: 83). Israel is also the focus of a recent paper (Alloun, 2020) on ‘veganwashing’, which argues that the growing popularity of veganism in the country is being used to situate Israel as a progressive and moral force and again distract from wider controversies regarding Israeli-Arab minorities and its treatment of Palestinians. In both of these instances, Israel is seeking to boost its reputational capital with a particular interest in engaging with Western elites and consumers. In our view, this is most akin to current examples of ‘sportswashing’ as it is dealing with governments seeking to distract from controversial policies or a damaged (global) reputation by associating themselves with positive brands, events or organizations, notably those associated with and/or based in the West (more of which, below).

In summary, then, what we have witnessed over the past two decades is a two-fold process. First, the notion of greenwashing has been developed and expanded by a range of academics and civil society groups, to include a whole host of different practices.

These range from the cover up of defective systems (as in the case of Volkswagen), to attempts by companies to sow confusion by setting up their own activist groups to support their endeavours (Lee, 2010). Second, the growing visibility of ‘greenwashing’ has encouraged others to adapt the washing metaphor and apply it to new areas of socio-economic and political life. For instance, as Table 1 suggests, this use has moved from a primary concern with the activities of commercial actors to also focus on states and their agents. Such a move highlights the extent to which building reputational capital has become a key objective for a growing range of private and public organizations in an era of increasing global links that have been partially underpinned by the rapid growth and adoption of digital technologies (Davis, 2013). Finally, there has been a shift away from attempts at outright concealment towards strategies that focus more on deflection and distraction, notably through practices of consociation. This latter point ties in rather well with Chadwick’s earlier definition of sportswashing which notes how it is designed to ‘deflect ... attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country’ (my emphasis, 2022: 12).

Before, however, assessing the emergence of sportswashing in wider public debates, as well as its utility as an analytical concept, it is perhaps worth briefly addressing its antecedents in sports research. For academics, from a range of disciplines, including politics, international relations, geography, sociology and communication studies, have long been interested in discussing, and theorising, the role of sport in building alliances, bolstering reputations and engaging audiences on a local, regional and global level. Moreover, they have employed a range of concepts, including propaganda, diplomacy, soft power and place branding, to try and make sense of these processes. In the following section, a brief overview of these concepts will be provided as a means of trying to pinpoint both their strengths and weaknesses but also what, if anything, makes sportswashing novel.

The antecedents of sportswashing

If we explore the academic literature, it is clear that interest in the ways in which sport has been used to pursue government objectives, engage foreign publics or promote a country on a more global scale has a relatively recent history. A search of the online database, the International Bibliography of Social Sciences (IBSS), shows that propaganda and diplomacy have a fairly long pedigree, with over 3000 and 2000 articles, respectively, published between 1930 and 1989. However, if one conducts a search of those terms linked to sport, a mere 64 and 44 hits, respectively, are generated.

This means that while there is passing mention of how the Nazi’s used the 1936 Olympics to promote their objectives and a brief nod to the role of sport in the Cold War, it is only in the last 30–40 years that academics have begun to take seriously the role that sport might have in promoting a country’s agenda, addressing global public opinion or shaping inter-state relations. For example, an IBSS search of the period, 1990–2019, lists thousands of journal articles with the keywords of sport and propaganda (4698) and sport and diplomacy (3144).

In the same period, two other related concepts have risen to prominence, both in general terms and in relation to sport. Emerging in the 1990s and 2000s, respectively,

Table 1. Typology of neologisms, using washing as a metaphor.

	Conceal	Confuse	Conspicuous	Perpetrator	Critics	Aim
White-washing	X			Government / commercial organization	Civil society groups / government agencies	Deregulation / reputational capital
Greenwashing	X	X	X	Commercial organization / national and supra-national governmental organizations	Civil society groups / government agencies	Deregulation / sales / reputational capital
Pinkwashing (Cancer)		X	X	Commercial organization	Civil society groups	Sales
Pinkwashing (LGBTQ)		X	X	Commercial organization / government	Academics / civil society groups	Sales / reputational capital
Veganwashing		X	X	Government	Academics	Reputational capital

soft power and place branding have been enthusiastically embraced by a range of scholars in the social sciences, with thousands of papers being published on the subjects of sport and soft power (6644) and sport and place branding (2277). Some of this growth can probably be attributed to the rapid expansion of the academic publishing industry as a whole. However, these figures also indicate the extent to which scholars are beginning to take the study of sport more seriously, including its use by states and other powerful institutions to try and bolster their image and reputation.

In the following sections, a brief overview of the extant literature is provided to show how the relationship between sport and state power/influence has been theorized over time. Of particular interest, here, will be the disciplinary boundaries of each approach, the cases that are most commonly used to exemplify them and their relative strengths and weaknesses. This overview begins with research into the relationship between sport and (state) propaganda.

Propaganda and sport

The political communications scholar Phillip Taylor uses the following definition of propaganda in an influential paper on the topic ‘any information, ideas, doctrine or special appeals, disseminated to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any special group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly’ (quoted in Taylor, 2002: 440). Although this type of ‘official’ definition broadly captures the activities of most states, propaganda is now generally used as a pejorative term that is applied to one group to denigrate the activities of another. Indeed, propaganda has increasingly been used to describe false or malicious messages that are designed to *conceal* ultimate ends or who might be responsible for an act (Auerbach and Castronovo, 2013), which makes it more akin to whitewashing. These negative connotations, combined with the fact that it has been recently superseded by other concepts, means that propaganda is often used to make sense of the activities of historical, and/or non-Western, states, at least in the West¹ (Sardar, 1998).

For instance, when it comes to examining the relationship between sport and propaganda, there has been a fair amount of study of the Nazi’s, the Soviets and the Chinese Communist Party (cf Arnaud and Riordan, 2013) and perhaps less focus on how other states have also used sport for propaganda purposes. Two examples of this include the large amount of work on the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which was designed to showcase the power of the Nazi’s (see, for example, Beamish and Ritchie, 2005; Freeman, 2012), and Soviet investment in sports programmes and events, seen as a high-profile means of promoting Communism during the Cold War (e.g. Grant, 2012; Parks, 2016).

While it is not possible to attend to the full range of arguments within this literature, one or two further points are worth noting. First, the links between propaganda and particular historical regimes means that it tends to be associated with mass media and mass audiences. Moreover, up until relatively recently this relationship was generally characterized in terms of a power imbalance, with a passive audience seen to be manipulated by media messages and those that controlled them (Herman and Chomsky, 2010)². This may have made the concept seem less applicable to the complex media environments of the contemporary era that have often been characterized by more active audiences both

when it comes to engaging with 'official' texts and, increasingly, producing their own content via digital platforms (Livingstone, 2013). It may be, then, that sportswashing is simply a new way of talking about propaganda in the digital era, an argument we will return to in the final part of this paper. First, however, we turn our attention to a number of other key concepts, public diplomacy, soft power and place branding, that have been used to try and explain the growing role of sport in promoting state power in the contemporary era.

Sport and diplomacy

In contrast to propaganda, diplomacy and soft power are both often portrayed as a positive feature of international relations, by focusing on the manner in which states and state institutions look to manage (potential) conflicts and build relationships through engagement and attraction rather than deception (Murray, 2018). Similarly, while the uses of sport for propaganda purposes are commonly critiqued, sports-diplomacy is often characterized as having the ability to 'promote international understanding and friendship, as well as dispel stereotypes and prejudices' (Murray and Pigman, 2014: 1102).

Again, it is worth briefly defining key terms. Diplomacy can be seen as 'the conduct of relations between sovereign states ... in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means' (Bull, 1977: 156). While diplomacy was initially tied to the activities of these 'official agents' of the state, more recent work on public and cultural diplomacy has focused on the manner in which non-state institutions, and actors can contribute to diplomatic efforts. And as part of this shift, growing attention has turned to the 'uses [of] sports people and sporting events to engage, inform and create a favourable image among foreign publics and organizations' (Murray and Pigman, 2014: 1107). A famous example of this is the 'ping pong diplomacy' of the early 1970s. Here a series of table tennis matches between representatives from the US and China were seen to pave the way to a rapprochement between the two countries, with the latter being admitted to the UN Security Council in 1972 (Itoh, 2011).

Sport is seen to be a particularly effective diplomatic tool because its social and cultural significance means that it can be used to access key state actors (Qingmin, 2013), target difficult to reach groups (Chehabi, 2001) and engage local/regional (Cha, 2013) and global media audiences (Murray, 2012: 582). In the latter case, it is global sporting events that have generated the largest media audiences in history, which makes them particularly attractive for public diplomatic purposes.

Three further points are worth noting for the purposes of this paper. First, just as studies of propaganda tend to be the preserve of historians, diplomacy and sport-diplomacy is most strongly associated with the discipline of international relations. Second, there has been a noticeable shift in not only who is involved in diplomatic efforts, moving from diplomats to high-profile cultural figures and even 'ordinary' people (Melissen, 2005), but also how such efforts are carried out, with digital media now seen to be an increasingly important element (Hoffmann, 2015). Finally, while sport and propaganda is often discussed in relation to non-Western states (at least in the West), then sports-diplomacy is very much associated with the activities of Western states as well. This is also partly true of soft power, the concept we turn to next.

Sport and soft power

While diplomacy has a fairly long history in the academy, the term soft power was only coined in 1990 by the American political scientist, Joseph Nye. In looking to assess US foreign policy during the Cold War and beyond, Nye argued that US superiority was not only based around its military and economic strength (labelled as hard power) but also its values, culture and ideology (Nye, 1990).

As we noted earlier, Nye's concept has been enthusiastically applied to studies of sport with three key themes emerging. First, the hosting of sporting events, most notably the soccer world cup and Olympics, has been seen as a particularly high-profile way to burnish a country's reputation and build soft power (Freeman, 2012). Much of this work has focused on attempts by rising global/regional powers and/or non-Western states to boost their global profiles and standing (Giulianotti, 2015). Second, in an echo of historical arguments around the Cold War, research has been carried out on attempts by countries to increase the success of their representatives at such events (Liu, 2020). Finally, it has been noted how sovereign wealth funds and other state backed financial institutions, in places like the Middle East, have sought to purchase major sporting icons, particularly Western-based clubs and players, to further soft power objectives (Krzyzaniak, 2018).

While it is now commonplace to talk about the latest round of bidding to host this tournament, or buy that club, in terms of soft power, it should be noted that the success of these sporting-relating endeavours has also been called into question. Indeed, a number of recent studies (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016, Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018) have begun to offer a more nuanced approach by introducing the notion of soft disempowerment. This is important for not only foreground *the process* by which soft power can be both accrued and lost, but also echoes Nye's key point concerning the link between credibility and reputation; 'Soft power depends upon credibility, and when governments are perceived as manipulative and information is seen as propaganda, credibility is destroyed' (Nye, 2012: 152). A good example of this is Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Olympics, which Manzenreiter (2010) argued was only a limited success as the Chinese state was unable to control the narrative of the games in Western media outlets. Similarly, Qatar's staging of the 2022 soccer world cup has exposed it to ongoing criticism in Western media concerning human rights abuses, illiberal attitudes towards women and sexual minorities and so on (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). In other words, while an association with a sports event or club can generate widespread media attention, in a complex, multi-platform media system it is not always easy to control the message, notably when it involves scrutiny from media outlets and NGO's from a range of different national contexts. Many of these critiques, and their targets, have also fed into arguments around sportswashing. However, it is interesting to note that while soft power has been discussed as a legitimate goal for all states (originating as a partial critique of the US government's belligerent foreign policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s), sportswashing is rarely, if ever, used outside discussions of the activities of non-Western states. This is a point that will be picked up in the final part of this review. In the next section, we briefly examine work on sport and place branding, which has very different disciplinary roots – in marketing and PR – than the other concepts discussed so far.

Sport and place branding

As for soft power, place branding has also been portrayed as a positive feature of the contemporary era that can be used to improve relations between states as they strive to build and/or improve their reputations. Most closely associated with the work of Simon Anholt (1998), place branding again has a relatively recent pedigree with no mentions of the term in the IBSS up until the 1990s. It is arguable that the growth of the term, and the practice, can also be linked to wider processes of economic integration as well as the market liberalization of increasing aspects of socio-cultural and political life. This is where the 'logic of branding' (Askegaard, 2006) becomes applied to a range of people, institutions, practices and locales, including nations, regions and cities. Anholt and his followers (see, e.g. Dinnie, 2004) have argued that place branding can improve relations between states as they compete against each other, and in the process raise standards of public and political life, in order to attract inward investment, boost tourism and so on.

Sport, and in particular the hosting of major sporting events, has been seen as a primary way in which countries can brand themselves on a regional or global level, either by raising awareness of key attributes (Knott et al., 2015) or by addressing a damaged or problematic reputation (Fauve, 2015). Much of the extant research on the topic has tended to focus on non-Western countries, arguing that such events can be used by rising nations (China, India, Russia) or significant regional powers (Brazil, South Africa) to try and improve their image and/or define themselves as global actors (see, e.g. Grix and Lee, 2013; Rein and Shields, 2007).

However, place-branding has also been applied to make sense of events held in the West. For instance, the 2012 Olympics, hosted by London, was often portrayed as an opportunity for Britain to reshape popular narratives, which often focused on history and tradition, and reposition the country as dynamic and progressive (Wagg, 2016). Whether a single event has the ability to shift existing narratives is again open to question, and the evidence is patchy (Browning, 2016).

As a result, there has been a more recent turn to question both the economic value of hosting such events (Thornley, 2012) as well their presumed social and political impact (Kaneva, 2011). Indeed, many of the criticisms directed at place branding (it represents style over substance, seeks positive associations rather than substantive change, obscures for political ends) also underpin some of the writing around sportswashing. In the final section, we look to draw some of these ideas together in order to both assess the value of this newer concept and suggest possible pathways for future research.

Washing up?

Whatever major sporting organizations and figures like to say, sport and politics most definitely do mix. Moreover, while this relationship has a long history, the contemporary era is one in which sport has become an increasingly popular means for boosting the profile of states, managing relations between states and looking to shift the debate around particular states. This growing interest in sport is a partial response to political, economic and technological changes since the Second World War, but particularly since the advent of digital technologies in the late 1990s (Hutchins and Rowe, 2009).

Sport matters because it plays a significant role in the lives of large numbers of people around the world and can be used to target the attention of particular groups, national, class-based, gender, age and so on (see, e.g. Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2022). Moreover, in a fragmented media landscape, it is also one of the few remaining forms of ‘content’ that can bring together large audiences (Skey, 2021). This makes it as attractive to media companies and sponsors as it does to governments and states.

As we have seen, attempts to make sense of the value of sport to state institutions have become the subject of growing academic interest with the amount of publications rising rapidly in the early 2000s and a number of key concepts being utilized. While these concepts may address broadly similar issues they come from very different disciplinary backgrounds, primarily focuses on quite different cases and often offer contrasting views when it comes to evaluating the sport-state nexus. An overview of each can be seen in Table 2.

What then of sportswashing? It has certainly become a popular phrase within mainstream media reporting but does it have any analytic value at all? Or put differently does it add anything to our current understanding of sport’s uses and abuses by state interests? In trying to answer this question, it may be worthwhile returning to an argument put forward by Herbert Blumer almost 70 years ago. In seeking to address concerns about the status of theory within the social sciences, Blumer drew a distinction between sensitising and definitive concepts. Arguing that social theory often rests ‘on vague sense and not on precise specification of attributes’, Blumer distinguished between ‘sensitizing concepts’, which ‘merely suggest directions along which to look’ and ‘definitive concepts’, which ‘provide prescriptions of what to see’ (1954: 4–5). Sensitizing concepts ‘lack precise reference and have no bench marks which allow a clean-cut identification of a specific instance and of its content. Instead, they rest on a general sense of what is relevant’ (Blumer, 1954).

Drawing on this distinction, it may be possible to see sportswashing as a ‘sensitizing concept’ that suggests where to look and what is relevant. In this case, sportswashing is first useful because it highlights the growing significance of image and reputation management in an era defined by intensifying global flows and, above all, the impact of digital technologies. In the latter case, the flow of information associated with these ‘new’ technologies makes concealment much more of a challenge, even for the most powerful of states. As a result, one of the key contributions of sportswashing is that it moves away from the idea of concealment or cover up associated with whitewashing and earlier conceptions of greenwashing and, instead, specifically draws attention to the ways in which

Table 2. Key concepts used to theorize the sport-state nexus.

What	Propaganda	Diplomacy	Soft Power	Place branding	Sportswashing
Where	Non-west	West (with some non-west)	West and non-west	Non-west and west	Non-west
Discipline	History	International relations	Politics and IR	Marketing/PR	None as yet
Evaluation	Negative	Positive	Positive	Positive	Negative

connections with sports are used in processes of consociation and deflection. In short, if Saudi Arabia is being discussed in relation to a well-run, high-profile golf or tennis tournament, then it isn't *only* being associated with an appalling human rights record, an inequitable political system or resource exploitation.

Indeed, the role of various media organizations and platforms in these wider debates, whether as advocates or critics, is worthy of further attention. This is particularly the case in relation to sports fans who can have a key role to play in supporting an owner or organizer that they believe is likely to offer their athletes, team or sport greater success (Guschwan, 2016).

Its critical approach also means that it moves beyond much of the literature on place branding and some of the work on diplomacy and soft power, which tends to operate with a more administrative model. Such approaches sometimes prioritize successful outcome measures over ethical or moral issues. This critical perspective cannot, however, only be limited to particular actors and it is notable that the term sportswashing tends to focus on a narrow range of non-Western actors, the most notable of which are Russia, Saudi Arabia and China. This does not mean falling into a dangerous form of relativism, but if sportswashing is to become a useful analytical concept, it needs to be applied to other parts of the world as well, where salient. For instance, we should ask whether an event like the 2012 London Olympics could ever be labelled as sportswashing, given that it arguably involved a former imperial power looking to raise its profile abroad (Grix et al., 2015) and domestically, perhaps, deflect attention away from a deeply unpopular programme of austerity (Widdop et al., 2018)? Likewise, as Chadwick quoted in Walt (2021) observes, 'If you sit in Qatar, you sit in Saudi Arabia, [they call what they are doing] nation building .. [or] .. soft power, ,, Sportswashing is in the eye of the beholder'. Therefore, as academics, we need to be consistent in our uses of concepts and be able to justify their application to particular cases, whether Western or not.

We also require better ways of evaluating the impact (or otherwise) of sportswashing. Some of the current debates seem to assume that the hosting of an event or purchase of a sports club naturally leads to favourable reviews or attitudes, whether among fans of a given club or the sport in general. Research around the hosting of mega events has shown a good deal of resistance from a range of sources (Boykoff, 2013, Skey et al., 2016). Therefore, we need to actively investigate who supports and who resists, through what means and channels and to what ends. It would also be useful to know more about the kinds of reputational capital that are generated by such associations with sporting events, organizations and personalities and to what extent they persist over time. Recent work on soft disempowerment points to the importance of also attending to the manner in which reputational capital can be threatened or lost with controversies around Qatar's hosting of the world cup again used as an exemplar in relation to sport (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016, Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018).

In summary, then, sportswashing is currently a popular neologism that has been used to write about particular types of regimes who are either seeking to bolster or manage their reputations on the international stage. Its main features are as follows:

- Sportswashing focuses on acts of consociation rather than deception. It is designed to build positive associations with a state/country rather than simply conceal

- It is focused on the activities of states and state actors who work with, or alongside, national or supra-national sporting organizations
- Thus far, it has only been used as a pejorative term, much like propaganda, to call into question these activities. This is in 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 the West

It is useful in that it points to issues and arguments that are not always addressed in depth by studies of (public) diplomacy, soft power or place branding. For instance, the key characteristics of digital media that allow information to flow in ways that are sometimes difficult to control or the changing value of sport (both economically, politically and culturally) in the contemporary era. Whether it can become more than a media headline, designed to generate criticism of a fairly narrow set of state actors requires longer-term empirical studies to assess the success of particular campaigns, notably the degree to which they influence public attitudes over time. But in helping to focus more attention on the ways in which sport is used to deflect and distract from the sometimes heinous activities of governments and their agents around the world (both Western and non-Western), it has already served a useful purpose.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. There is no space here to address the complex debate about Western versus non-Western states and how they are defined (see Wallerstein (1979) and de Sousa Santos (2009) for a general discussion and Henry and Al-Tauqi (2008) in relation to sport).
2. See Livingstone (1996) for a critique.

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