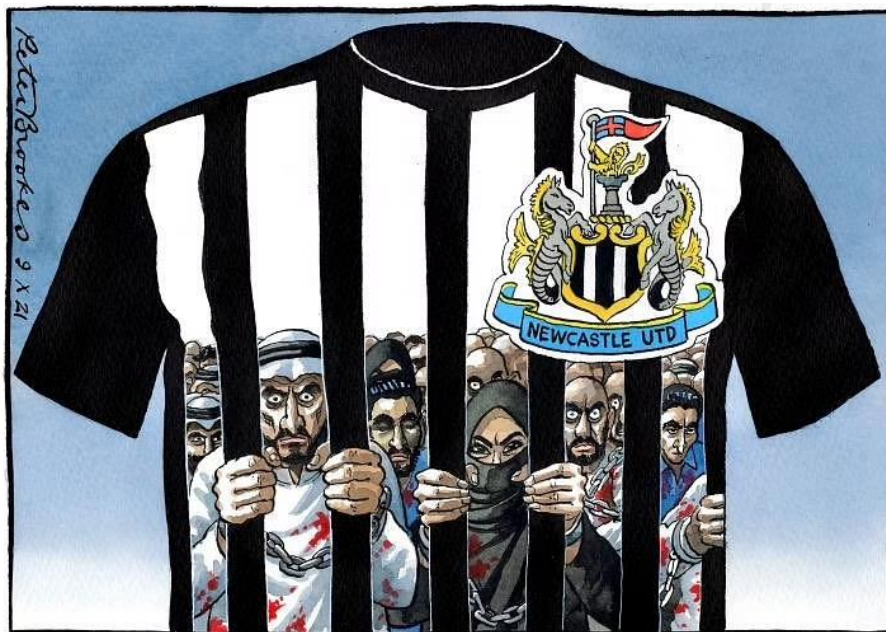


Newcastle, Saudi Arabia, and the Shifting of the Goalposts in English Football: A Triangulated Case Study Analysis of Sportswashing in the “Beautiful” Game



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Abstract

The takeover of Newcastle United Football Club by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund in October, 2021, marked the latest and most spectacular, high-profile injection of oil money from the Gulf States into European football. Confronted by the need to diversify their oil-dependent economies, the Gulf States have embarked on an unprecedented investment drive that is reshaping the boundaries of football. For many, this process has come to be known as “sportswashing”, that is, the practice of a state using sport to direct attention away from human rights abuses and in order to improve their public image (Amnesty, 2018). These controversial developments have raised a myriad of pertinent questions about the future of football; Why have autocratic regimes become so interested in English football clubs? What is “sportswashing” and how has it come to be? What are the consequences of this strategy and what does it mean for the future of sport and global affairs? And finally, what is our role, as fans, if any? This triangulated case study will try to surmise the impact of the so-called “sportswashing” phenomenon by building up a novel, conceptual framework of this understudied topic, such that, we may better understand the dynamics and mechanisms that underpin it. I have demonstrated throughout the duration of the piece how a myriad of factors including institutional and regulatory deficiencies, the hyper-commercialisation of sport, geopolitical considerations, and rogue autocrats, have combined to create an environment, which I argue, is ripe for sportswashing. By the end of the paper, I have put forward a new definition for “sportswashing” that better captures its place in our modern society, offered up potential solutions to push back against sportswashing, as well as addressing its future in the coming years and decade, and whether it is here to stay or not. The paper concludes with the assertion that sportswashing has become a highly effective soft power tool, that in conjunction with other strategies, will help states project their soft power capabilities on the world stage, while also being a viable hard power alternative to achieve certain aims, as the palpability of harder methods such as military intervention has diminished.

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Newcastle, Saudi Arabia, and the Shifting of the Goalposts in English Football: A Case Study Analysis of Sportswashing in the “Beautiful” Game

1. Introduction

At the conception of this research project in November, 2021, Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC), was languishing at the bottom of the English Premier League table. The famous Northern club yet to register a win in the current league campaign despite becoming the world's "richest" football club in October, 2021, when a consortium led by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF) purchased the club for £300 million (Kelsey, 2021). The club's fortunes have changed since then, under the tutelage of Eddie Howe and on the back of a transfer splurge in January, have all but secured their survival in the cut-throat Premier League.

This has been the latest high-profile injection of oil money from the Gulf States into European football following the takeovers of Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain by the Abu Dhabi United Group and the Qatar Investment Authority respectively. Newcastle United's takeover however has been particularly controversial against the backdrop of a global pandemic and ever-worsening inequalities. The Premier League's 19 other members have all condemned the takeover, citing Saudi Arabia's horrific human rights records and its controversial involvement in, amongst other things, the war in Yemen and the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi (The Guardian, 2021).

Confronted by the need to diversify their oil-dependent economies, the Gulf States have embarked on an unprecedented investment drive that has reshaped the boundaries of football around the world, but especially in Europe and England. This shifting of the goalposts had led to the erosion of traditional domestic-based leagues and cups, in a worrying trend that is reshaping the elite level of club football into a competition between mega-club brands propped up by amongst others, the Gulf States (Thani and Heena, 2017). Clubs whose traditional support was drawn from the locality have now become global brands with supporters spread over every continent as the sport increasingly grapples with issues of placelessness, commercialization, and hyper-capitalization.

These developments have raised a myriad of pertinent questions surrounding the future of football, the world's most beloved pastime; 1) Why have autocratic regimes taken a shine towards English football clubs? 2) What are the consequences of these new models of ownership and what do they mean for the future of the game? 3) What do these developments say about us football fans, and do we have a role to play when confronted by such a moral dilemma? This research project is therefore attempting to analyse Saudi Arabia and the UAE's strategies to purchase English Premier League football clubs (Newcastle and Manchester City), pump a massive amount of capital into said clubs to make them successful, such that on the back of this success they may increase their own soft power, portray a favorable image to the rest of the world, and cover up their own heinous crimes, in what I argue amounts to two classic examples of “sportswashing”.

From the point of view of the Gulf States, European football clubs have become helpful tools to help (re)brand themselves as modern and progressive nations, willing and able to contribute geopolitically

to the neoliberal world economy, while the ability of the game to promote a new national identity that enables the sheikhdoms to reposition themselves globally should not be underestimated (Thani and Heenan, 2017). However, underneath the surface, the political motivations and soft power considerations of club ownership cannot be disregarded, as one begins to question whether clubs like Newcastle have just become "pawns" for the Gulf States as they fight out their own regional rivalries within the stadia of the United Kingdom. Similarly, the notion of an "arms race", already well established in college football in the United States (Ubben, 2022), does no longer seem so far-fetched, as turbocapitalistic tendencies are contributing to a growing fragmentation between the elite clubs and the rest, a development characterised by the spectacular failure of the proposed European Super League. Despite this setback, one cannot help but think that this will not be the last time that the new football financial oligopoly will attempt to shift the goalposts of European football.

1.1 Research Objective and Research Question(s)

The main research question of this paper is:

- *Why have autocratic regimes with appalling human rights records from the Gulf States began acquiring English football clubs in recent years?*

Leading from this question I have formulated several sub-questions:

- *How has sportswashing come to be and what have been the main development in the fields of sports, politics, and human rights that have led to its widespread application around the world?*
- *What are the consequences of this so-called sportswashing and what do it mean for the future of sport and politics?*
- *What do these developments say about us as football fans and do we have a role to play when confronted by such a moral dilemma?*
- *What does the phenomenon of sportswashing tell us about the significance of football in global affairs and vice-versa?*

The objective of this research will be to surmise the impact of the sportswashing phenomenon on English football and specifically on two football clubs, Newcastle and Manchester City, who have both been acquired by state-owned companies and sovereign wealth funds originating from Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates respectively.

This research is motivated by my own experiences as a football fan. Like so many others, I began playing football at a very young age and continued to do so until my late teens when both a lack of talent and a debilitating knee injury, meant that I transferred into management. I have therefore been in and around the game for the vast majority of my life and throughout that time I have always identified as a Manchester City fan, my parents having lived in the city, near the old Maine Road

stadium, for over a decade. On paper, the years since 2008, when my club was purchased by the Abu Dhabi United Group, have been the best in the club's history.

However, behind the scenes of this period of unrivaled success, a far grimmer reality is apparent, something my research into this topic have revealed. I was deeply disturbed that my beloved team was the classic example of sportswashing in football, an inconsequential team plucked from mediocrity as part of the UAE's soft power strategy aimed at recalibrating the state's image to one of tolerance and progression, when in fact, the UAE's complete and utter intolerance and lack of progression is there for all to see once one scratches below the thin surface: involvement in the conflicts in Libya and Yemen, a refusal to work with human rights organisations and the UN, no freedom of expression, almost non-existent women's rights, and the prohibition of rights based on one's membership of the LGBTQ+ community (HRW, 2022). Puzzled by this phenomenon I have decided to dig deeper into this topic, to understand its root causes, its consequences, and whether or not it is indicative of other political matters taking place around the world.

1.2 Societal and Scientific Relevance

Sportswashing represents a significant societal issue. Sport, and in particular, football, has acquired global commercial, cultural, and political eminence in recent decades. Connell (2018) has even gone as far as to say that football is the cultural and economic form that most effectively crosses all political boundaries and galvanises disparate communities all over the world. By virtue of the fact that sports, and specifically in this case, football, is being used to launder the reputations of some of the world's most repressive regimes, who stand accused of violating the human rights of millions of people, to me signifies an extremely salient topic that warrants further study. As the world's favorite pastime, with hundreds of millions of people tuning in to watch their favorite teams every week, and as a football fan myself, I feel that it is of paramount importance that awareness about this dreadful new form of malpractice is increased as I am sure that many people, like myself before I started researching this topic, are not even aware that such things are going on in the backrooms of their adored football clubs.

As a relatively new concept, the academic literature and thus the scientific debates around "sportswashing" are very much in their infancy, which is why I believe my research question possesses a high level of scientific relevance. There is a clear gap in the literature which I believe my paper can therefore help to fill. Sportswashing as a modern phenomenon has become a fundamental part of the soft power strategies of autarkic states the world over, yet despite this very little effort has been made by the scientific/academic community to study sportswashing and its potential effect on not only the realm of sports, but also human rights, and the viability of oppressive regimes in the 21st century. My proposed paper will therefore attempt to establish a foundation from which the notion of sportswashing may receive a proper academic treatment in the future.

As mentioned, "sportswashing" is still very much in its conceptual infancy and as such, the academic debate relating to the topic are not yet well developed. The topic has however been described as a form of whitewashing, that is, the act of covering up crimes or scandals through the use of biased data or cursory investigations (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2003). Sportswashing has also been referred to as a form of propaganda by the human rights organisation, Grant Liberty (2021).

Owing to the newness of the topic, there is a significant dearth of knowledge relating to the theory and other such mechanisms that underpin the workings of sportswashing. Thus, solutions to the issue of manipulating the power of sport in order to improve one's reputation, are as of yet still largely unknown. Bar the raising of awareness within the media and by human rights organisations, little has been done to rectify the most prominent cases of sportswashing in recent times as evident from consistent inaction by sporting governing bodies such as FIFA, the IOC, and the FA over the despicable actions of Qatar, China, and Saudi Arabia pertaining to their flagrant and long-standing mistreatment of humans rights.

2. Methodology, Methods and Techniques

This research will take the form of a comparative case study of two football clubs using multi-method data from desk research, unstructured interviews, a geopolitical context analysis, and a content analysis. Data will be drawn from a large corpus of data gathered from academic scholars, reports, newspaper articles, and conversations with fans and experts. This paper can therefore be looked at as a conceptual study, rather than an empirical one, that is attempting to analyse the significance of existing knowledge such that I may better describe the phenomenon of sportswashing. The case study form will also be supplemented by a broad geopolitical contextual analysis of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, . As such, this project can be said to be utilising triangulation as an analysis technique, that is, the use of multiple methods in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of sportswashing (Patton, 1999). The triangulated format of the study ensured I was able to gather knowledge from various, comparable perspectives, thus increasing the confidence around the findings (Flick, 2004). While it is impossible to capture the full nature of a phenomenon as it is happening, the triangulated approach allowed me to account for a wide variety of developments relating to sportswashing in real-time, as the mechanisms underpinning sportswashing constantly ebbed and flowed as they interacted with wider world events such as COVID-19 or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which although seemingly unrelated to sportswashing, would end up having an unexpectedly weighty impact on it.

The research will be an instrumental case study (Mills et al., 2010), whereby the research is guided by an interest in sportswashing as a phenomenon, with the cases of Newcastle and Manchester City being secondary to this. The qualitative nature of this project was particularly well suited to the study of sportswashing as its structure allowed for the inclusion of unexpected events and narratives that emerged throughout the duration of the study (Koch, 2016), as proved to be the case, with several important developments materialising about sportswashing in the last few months. Overall, I believed this to be the most suitable methodology to fill the research gap and answer the research questions, allowing me to formalise sportswashing as it interacts with diverse and distinct stimuli in varied settings.

2.1 Case Studies

My project will follow a qualitative research design, that is, with a preference for explanation through words, rather than through quantification of data (Bryman and Cramer, 2012). By employing this method, I set out to understand sportswashing through an analysis of its interpretation in the world by

its stakeholders. The main research method will be a case study approach. The main focus of the project will be the case of Newcastle United Football Club and its new owner, the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund. This primary case will be supplemented by another related case, Manchester City Football Club (MCFC) and its owners, the Abu Dhabi United Group. The two cases share several similarities that lend themselves well to a comparative case study approach, with both clubs at different points on a similar cycle, Manchester City about ten years ahead of Newcastle having been purchased by the Abu Dhabi Group at the turn of the last decade.

The utility of a case study research design lies in the method's ability to explore and situate the concept of sportswashing within the context of English football and the deplorable human rights situation in the Gulf States, with a view to deepening the understanding of said topic. The comparative element of the case study will allow for the analysis and synthesis of the differences, patterns, and similarities across the two chosen cases, with the aim of producing some new knowledge within and across contexts related to sportswashing.

Along these lines, a case study, that is, the intense study of a singular unit with the aim of generalisation across a bigger set of cases (Gerring, 2004), has been conducted, primarily, through the analysis of Saudi Arabia (SA) and the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) sportswashing strategies, while also making reference to several documents that refer to sportswashing in relation to both cases. The utilisation of the case study method has allowed for a suitably deep level of analysis which would have been difficult to replicate with other research designs. It is hoped that the case study format will contribute to an effective understanding of how, why, and when sportswashing occurs, while also producing findings that are applicable to other sportswashing cases that have been mentioned throughout the piece, without going into too much detail on them in this instance (for example, Saudi involvement in LIV Golf).

I have opted to choose the NUFC and SA case as I feel it highlights a paradigmatic example of sportswashing that is profoundly salient in today's society. The high level of media attention the case received, coupled with the dearth of academic writing on the matter and my own personal interest in the EPL, meant that it was an obvious choice for me. For reasons already outlined, the MCFC and UAE case was chosen to supplement the primary case, as a more established example of sportswashing in a similar setting, from which we can draw lessons that may be applied to the main case.

2.2 Interviews

I intend to use unstructured interviews as a data collection strategy to supplement the aforementioned case study. The interviews will be designed to investigate how various stakeholders understand the social and cultural context of their positions vis-a-vis A) the clubs they pledge allegiance to and B) the people/organisations that have recently acquired their clubs. The aim of this will be to gauge how these parties interpret and attribute meaning to the phenomenon of sportswashing as it pertains to their own experiences and lives. Questions will also aim to understand the respondent's thoughts on the potential danger of putting a cultural institution like a football club into the hands of dubious autocrats, as well as their thoughts on whether their loyalty and commitment as fans is being subverted by these nefarious characters.

The interviews were of an informal nature and were conducted online via Zoom/Teams throughout the duration of the project, with a handful of interviews conducted at stadiums before and after football games. In the end I interviewed academics coming from different fields (sports economists, sports historians, political scientists), journalists (investigate and independent), students, and football fans from the United Kingdom itself (Manchester City, Liverpool, and Reading FC fans), Ireland (Bohemians FC), Germany (Borussia Dortmund), and the Netherlands (N.E.C. Nijmegen, P.S.V. Eindhoven). The interviews were not transcribed but rather utilised to inform some of my own opinions and thoughts on sportswashing, while engaging with relevant stakeholders from various football clubs situated in a variety of settings, ranging from small-town clubs like N.E.C. Nijmegen and Reading, to world-leading clubs like Manchester City and Liverpool. The range of clubs also represented a continuum of different ownership and institutional structures, for example, Manchester City are obviously a prime example of a quasi-state-owned investment vehicle or a sportswashing team, while Borussia Dortmund and Bohemians represent a supposedly more equitable, fan-ownership model, that reflects more socialist values.

These contrasting club models, with clubs from various different levels of the footballing tournaments, meant I was able to gather a diverse range of perspectives from fans who fundamentally view their clubs in completely contrasting ways. Fan engagement also enabled me to examine the impact of sportswashing as it pertains to the shaping of attitudes, while also opening up the floor to additional comments which I had not expected (Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016). I had originally planned on undertaking fieldwork in the city of Newcastle, however, for various uncontrollable factors, this did not materialise. Nonetheless, attending various football matches and visiting stadiums undoubtedly benefited the project and allowed me to relate findings and data from other parts of the project.

2.3 Geopolitical Contextual Analysis

A geopolitical analysis involves the study of foreign policy in order to improve understanding, explain, and even predict international political behaviour through geographical variables, with a focus on political power as it relates to geographical space (Ilies et al., 2016). This element of the research project will consider the geopolitical positions of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, by situating both against the backdrop of geopolitical events in the Middle East, and the wider world. To understand fully the consequences of sportswashing, it is important to take a step back and analyse the phenomenon within a wider geopolitical context, as it is often these geopolitical forces and events that are some of the primary motivations and drivers behind the actions of such states.

Given the importance of the Middle East to global geopolitics, a geopolitical analysis of two of its most prominent members seems a natural step in my research design. Such an analysis will improve our understanding of how these actors establish, maintain and improve control over space, both at home and abroad, by drawing our attention to how geographical factors, like oil, are used to achieve political goals, like sportswashing and soft power enhancement (Oselska, 2015). The geographies of SA and the UAE have bestowed upon them unique economic, political, strategic, and cultural features that provide the basis for how they interact with domestic and foreign actors, and as such, it is critical to examine these geographic variables.

2.4 Literature Review

The literature review has explored a myriad of scholarly sources relating to the overarching topic of sportswashing. In doing so, an extensive overview of the current state-of-the-art regarding sportswashing has been provided, while key relevant theories, methods, and gaps in the literature have been identified. To understand why states like Saudi Arabia purchase clubs like Newcastle United for vast sums of money, despite having no obvious historical connection, we will need to consult some relevant theories. Given the lack of scholarship on sportswashing (a trend I expect to be reversed in the coming months on the back of, amongst other events, the Winter Olympics in China and the World Cup in Qatar) I had to widen the scope of my research in the beginning, in order to establish a suitable foundation for a conceptual framework.

Starting with the theoretical relationship underpinning the nexus between sports and politics, I eventually narrowed the scope of my research to focus on what I believe to be the most important elements that help in the explanation of sportswashing. This process resulted in the examination of theories relating to soft power, the hosting of mega-sport events, nation branding, and sports diplomacy, while also reviewing the literature on the relationship between autocracy and sport. This was a dynamic process that involved the continuous analysis of documents relating to sportswashing and its related sub-fields as they were released by various sources, reflecting the nascent, yet exciting, character of writing on sportswashing (Bowen, 2009). This process equipped me with critical contextual information that ensured I was able to effectively cover all necessary points relating to the topic.

2.5 Content (Policy and Media) Analysis

The content analysis surveys who is saying what about a specific topic, to whom this message is delivered, through what channel, and to what effect (Lasswell, 1948). By conducting a content analysis I will collect and analyse data that will aid in my understanding of the meanings ascribed to sportswashing by various different entities, such as the media and government bodies. This process will involve unpacking the meaning behind beliefs, cultures, symbols, and institutions from which assumptions and interpretations about sportswashing are made. In doing so, it is hoped that certain trends, biases, and connections about the topic that would otherwise not be immediately obvious, can be discerned.

In order to fully unpack it, I have conducted a thorough analysis of documents discussing sportswashing in relation to the NUFC and Saudi Arabi case (primarily), the MCFC and UAE case (secondary), and other significant sportswashing incidents such as LIV Golf, Formula 1, and boxing. To ensure credibility and factuality, I have consulted several broadsheet newspapers (The Guardian), international news sources (BBC, Al Jazeera), government documents endorsed or published by state ministries (Vision 2030), and non-governmental documents (Amnesty, Human Rights Watch, The Athletic). Tabloid papers and social media content have been excluded in the name of integrity. This systematic review of content has enabled me to extract meaning, develop an understanding, and create new knowledge about sportswashing, culminating in a fruitful description of sportswashing itself, as well as the various distinct phenomena that predicate it.

3. Sportswashing: Beautiful Game, Ugly Business

Before continuing into the comprehensive review of the literature that I propose underpins the main mechanisms of sportswashing, it is important to set the scene by giving an overview on the current state of affairs with regards to sportswashing, as well as the standing of sport in the Middle East. I will also review the literature that maps out the nexus between sport and politics, as well as the curious historical relationship between sport and authoritarian leaders.

2021 has not been a vintage year by any stretch of the imagination. The COVID-19 pandemic has raged on unabated, democracies all over the planet are under siege, and millions of people across Afghanistan, Yemen, and Ethiopia, to name but a few, are living through what could only be described as hell on earth. The realm of sports was similarly touched by 2021's ominous glare. Once considered an apolitical act of leisure and play, sport has become inextricably linked to the more inhospitable domains of commerce and politics. A cursory glance at some of the year's biggest sport-related stories paints a rather gloomy picture; the silent Olympics in Tokyo, the Peng Shuai debacle in China, and of course, the effective take-over by the Saudi state of one of England's largest football clubs, Newcastle United. Such a takeover reflects the collapse of the separation between state and corporation, while raising the somewhat ironic question of why corporate ownership of football clubs is accepted, while state ownership is seen as a pressing issue.

2022 is set to be another controversial year for sport in general, and a potential watershed moment in sportswashing's grand public unveiling and tacit acceptance by the masses, who opt to tune into the World Cup in Qatar, or the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Qatar's hosting of the first-ever winter World Cup, a concession made on the grounds that it would be too hot to play there in the usual World Cup summer slot (Pattisson, 2013), is wrought with controversies. The horrendous treatment of migrant workers with the Guardian (2021) reporting that at least 6,500 workers from Nepal, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka have died since construction began 10 years ago. And what does it say when one of the most-watched events in the world is being hosted in a country where it is illegal to be LGBTQ+?. Despite widespread calls for a boycott and plenty of empty rhetoric from politicians, not one country has yet taken any concrete measures against Qatar or FIFA. Similarly, with the Winter Olympics in Beijing, a hollow diplomatic boycott was called to little or no effect by a small handful of countries, this despite the accusations of atrocities against the Uyghur Muslim minority in Xinjiang with the BBC (2021) reporting that 1.5-2 million Uyghurs are being interned in "re-education camps". Both these countries are hoping that their hosting of an MSE will clean up their image, and whom is it to say that they are wrong?

Sportswashing, a term coined by Amnesty International (2018), is the practice of a state, individual, or company, using sport to improve its reputation. In recent times it has become synonymous with nation-states utilising sport to direct attention away from human rights abuses and in order to improve their public image. The concept may even stretch back millennia, with Difato (2021) arguing that the Ancient Egyptian's birthed the notion of sportswashing in wrestling rings and through their subjugation of the Nubian people as far back as 1335 BC. The Ancient Romans were also well-versed in the art of sportswashing, birthing the concept of "bread and circuses", that is, the generation of public approval, not by excellence in governance, but by diversion, distraction, or by satisfying the most immediate needs of society (Eisinger, 2000).

In the modern era, sportswashing's first truly global applications could be said to be the infamous 1934 FIFA World Cup in Italy and the 1936 Nazi Berlin Olympics. Both Adolf Hitler and Benito

Mussolini understood then, like many autocrats do now, the political capital and soft-power propaganda that can be garnered from such sporting events (Rippon, 2006). Jessie Owens, an African-American, would famously go on to win four gold medals at the Games, a sharp rebuttal to Hitler's Aryan master race theory, however, the Nazis were still able to temporarily assuage their unfavourable global image, while Berkes (2008) notes how the event allowed the Germans to promote an accommodatory mood from the rest of the world as the cogs of war slowly began to turn. Despite widespread calls for a boycott of the Games, the 49 nations who still opted to send teams went some way in legitimising Hitler's despotic regime in the eyes of both regular Germans, and citizens from all over the world. Will there be any boycotts in Beijing or Doha this coming year?



Figure 1: A poster from the 1936 Summer Olympics, often called the Nazi Olympics (Notice the Roman pageantry in the bottom right corner)(Wurbel, 1934).

Since then, sportswashing has become an invaluable tool for dictators and juntas the world over. The 1978 World Cup in post-Peron Argentina was notoriously exploited by the country's military junta to cover up its own crimes during the "Dirty War" (Ellis, 2020), while the 1980 Moscow Olympics was inundated with communist-related symbolism, whereby the hammer and sickle and Lenin's bust were never far away from the cameras (Loland, 2021). The list of infamous cases goes on but some other classic examples include Silvio Berlusconi's ownership of AC Milan, Gazprom's involvement with the UEFA Champions League, and Qatar's sponsorship of several high-profile football clubs including Barcelona, Paris Saint-Germain, and Bayern Munich.

The primary manifestations of sportswashing are through corporate sponsorship (Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, Aramco's sponsorship of Formula One), the hosting of sporting events (WWE in Saudi Arabia), individual (Irish gang boss Daniel Kinahan's role as a boxing promoter) and team sportswashing (Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich's ownership of Chelsea F.C.), which is usually associated with nation-states (Saudi Arabi, the UAE). The focus of my research is team sportswashing by nation-states. Many nations, like humans, struggle with their image and reputations. Some of these issues are down to external factors, such as (archaic) stereotypes, while others are caused internally,

originating from the political/economic/cultural arenas. Indeed, Fan (2008) notes how despite processes like globalisation, huge divides and obstacles are still evident in the awareness between different nations and their corresponding cultures, an obvious example being the awkward relationship between Anglo-Saxon Christian societies in the West, and Islamic societies in the East, both groups being very much at odds with how each one lives their lives. Following on from this, many countries outside of the “traditional West” must grapple with negative impressions on their way of life, many of which are completely unsubstantiated. Sportswashing has thus become a valuable tool through which a country can re-brand itself to a global audience (Kobierecki and Strozek, 2017).

3.1 The Gulf States, Black Gold, and Football: A Match Made in Heaven/Hell?

Historically when one thinks of the Middle East region and sport, football is not the first activity that comes to mind. Rather, traditional sports such as falconry, camel racing, archery, Saluki racing, and oil wrestling seem better suited to the arid climates and anti-Western sentiment that was common in these formerly insular nations (Reiche and Sorek, 2019). However, in an extremely short time-span, this notion has been completely turned on its head. The money of two major Gulf players, the UAE and Qatar, has long saturated European football, now, we can add Saudi Arabia to that list. Later this year the 22nd FIFA World Cup, the world’s largest mega-sporting event (MSE), will be held in the tiny desert nation of Qatar, whose population does not even number 1 million people, the vast majority of whom are migrant workers (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2014). This is the culmination of an unprecedented investment drive in recent years by the oil-rich Gulf States, who having realised that their “black gold” is finite, have set out to diversify their fossil-fuel-dependent economies. The awarding of football’s greatest showcase to a nation with no footballing history or pedigree is a morbid reminder that the power centres in football have truly shifted (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015). As was seen in the oil crises of the 1970s, the ability of the oil states to dictate global economic matters then has become even more pronounced. As time has passed, they have gained more and more influence in the cultural and political realms as well.

FIFA are not however the first to make use of the seemingly endless supplies of money coming out of the Gulf, although it must be asked, are FIFA making use of the Gulf States, or is it the other way around?. Way back in 1977, the legendary manager of Leeds United, Don Revie, infamously left his post as the manager of the England national football team, in order to take a position as the head coach of the UAE national team. The move sparked a national outrage, with the FA charging Revie for bringing the game into disrepute, as well as slapping him with a 10-year suspension from all footballing activities (later upturned). Revie did not seem to care as he rode off into the desert, his new pay package of £85,000 per annum dwarfing his previous salary of £25,000 (Mourant, 2012).

Known as a managerial maverick for his pioneering training methods, Revie would not be the first, or the last, to make the trip east, but it would be the wealth that flowed in the opposite direction throughout the following years that would truly go on to change the footballing ecosystem forever. Indeed, since Revie made his pioneering journey almost 50 years ago, there has been a growing, and worrying entanglement of what has come to be known as Middle Eastern state capitalism in the UK.

The cases of both NUFC and MCFC highlight that football club ownership leads to buy-in from influential figures who are invested in the success of the team, be that economic stakeholders, who run businesses that will benefit from cash pouring into the club and the city, or political stakeholders, such as local councilors and elected officials, who wishing to keep their seats, do not want to be seen

going against fans and who also may see opportunities for investment. McGeehan (2017) has even shown how such influence has prevented local media from seriously probing accusations against club owners accused of human rights violations, murder, and war crimes, in what amounts to press silencing and suppression. Unsurprisingly then we are seeing this oil money percolate beyond its original scope, as it starts to transform the city itself, its political, economic, and cultural spheres all affected.

3.2 Sports and (Geo)politics: Politics by Other Means?

There is no doubt that sports and politics have become inextricably linked. Once the sole premise of regular people seeking wellness, camaraderie, and enjoyment, these two seemingly antithetical worlds have merged together through an awkward marriage of convenience. The contrast of the simplicity of sport against the complexity of politics is a sharp one but nonetheless, the two often mix with varying results ranging from the combustible to the bucolic. The Ping-Pong diplomacy between the US and China in the 1970s and Argentina overcoming England against the backdrop of the Falklands War at the Mexico World Cup in 1986 are just two examples of the frequent, if not subtle, nexus between sports and politics (Cooper, 2014; Causo and Di Domizio, 2013). Indeed, the interaction between sports and politics is a grossly understudied field given its practical salience in today's society, with very few scholars opting to study the impact of sports on politics (and vice-versa) or the strategic political use of sport by states. Allison and Monnington (2002) write that one of the main reasons why sport has been overlooked by the academy is because it does not fit neatly into the theoretical confines of realism and idealism, two approaches which formed the bedrock of political science and international relations. The fact that football as a cultural and economic form seamlessly crosses political borders, both tangible and intangible, and electrifies so many people all over the world, means that it must be given significant academic consideration. While processes such as globalisation and internationalisation have recondited the sporting world since the time of Ancient Greece, the birthplace of modern sport, it continues to play an outsized and influential role all over the planet where it captures hearts and minds, while generating colossal revenues (Zolberg, 1987; Elias and Dunning, 1986)

Throughout history the arena of sport has provided a safe space for actors to meet in circumstances where they otherwise would not have done so. In fact, sports, and particularly football, through the significant public goodwill it can generate has been known to open the door for many a diplomatic breakthrough (Raeissadat et al., 2021). A myriad of leaders including Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping have used the hosting of MSEs like the World Cup and the Olympics to such ends. Indeed, historian Eric Hobsbawm (Hill, 2003) notes how during the two World Wars, sport became an imitation of national struggles. According to Connell (2018) many states view sporting success as a measure of their status and standing in the wider international community, in what she claims amounts to a form of banal nationalism.

Rivalries and tensions between nations are played out in gymnasiums, fields, and ice rinks all over the world, with most sporting competitions having at least some, and most of the time a lot, of political reasoning behind it. Sport is therefore extremely powerful. It can capture a nation's imagination and elicit more pride and patriotism than any painting or piece of music could ever wish to do. Sport is emotion and the emotions omitted in the spectacle of sport bind people together and helps them to identify themselves amongst others (Cha, 2009). Indeed, sport has been known to elicit a reaction that

is not too dissimilar from the well-established notion of the rally around the flag effect, while its binding quality evokes a united identity that is analogous to Anderson's (2006) conception of an imagined community. Fisher (2002) has aptly described sport as a sort of prism through which national identities are transmitted all over the planet. The seemingly non-consequential act of scoring a goal can take on so much meaning for so many people, lifting entire nations and projecting an image of triumphant greatness. Sport thus has a unique capacity to reinforce national identities, on top of its obvious function as an image enhancer, in terms of its soft power implications and its ability to garner acceptance from the international community (Samuel-Azran et al., 2016).

Football, in particular, as one of the world's most recognised shared phenomena, an empire in of itself, is a fine reflection of (geo)politics that transcends the pitches it is played on. More universal than capitalism, democracy, and the internet (Scutti and Wendt, 2016), its governing body, FIFA, boasts more members than the UN, and while presenting itself as an NGO, it is a supra-national governmental body in all but name. In fact, many states, such as Taiwan and Palestine, have sought out FIFA membership before a UN one, for the visibility, legitimacy, and symbolism such an act can bring about. The aforementioned states recognising the power of having a team participating in the world's most popular sport and how this can give their citizen's a proud motif around which they can rally or a rightful claim to their homelands.

3.3 Sports and Autocracy

Throughout history authoritarian leaders have equated sporting success as a measure of political power and influence. From Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini (pictured below) in the past, to Viktor Orban and Vladimir Putin in the present day, these like-minded autarks consider success on the field to be a manifestation of their nation's strength and greatness, which in turn, is a reflection of their own individual immensity and vigor (Puddington, 2017). Consequently, authoritarian leaders often portray themselves as sporting enthusiasts, with many frequently being pictured engaging in some physical sporting activity, or just trying to emit a sporting persona. Putin and Mussolini (pictured below) were regularly photographed exerting themselves bare-chested, Putin a huge advocate for judo and ice hockey, Mussolini an avid football and motor racing fan. This phenomenon stretches as far back as to Roman times where Emperors such as Commodus and Nero were fond of showcasing their gladiatorial and chariot racing skills. Other examples of such "sporting autocrats" include Chairman Mao (swimming), Kim Jong-il (golf), and Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan of the UAE (falconry) (Koch, 2016). The symbolism imbued within the imagery of these sporting dictators is clear; how can the dominion over which they rule be considered frail, when its leader is strong and robust?

Evidently, the relationship between sports and authoritarianism is well-documented. Dictators have always tapped into the spectacle of sports and sporting success as a mechanism for eliciting national pride, building up domestic and international legitimacy, and encouraging nationalist sentiment (Lee and Bairner, 2009). The political and social significance of sport and its analogous relationship with nationalism, hyper-masculinity, and power, has meant that it has become a staple of the dictator's arsenal. Even Adolf Hitler, although not a sportsman or fan himself, said of sports that it was the quickest and most suitable way of "confounding political troublemakers and rabble-rousers" (Gallan, 2022). Sport has long been the means through which the machoistic jingoism of such autocrats has been transmitted to their subjects.

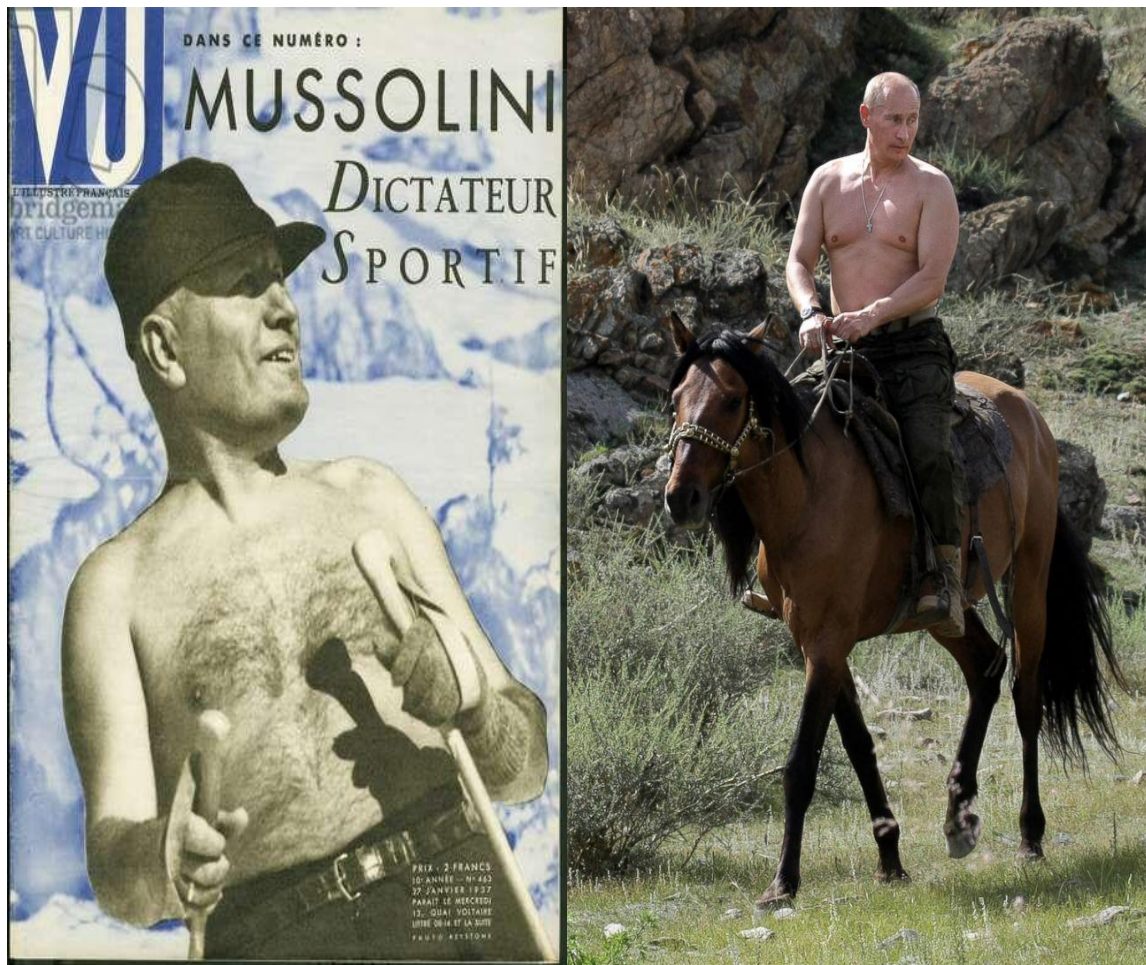


Figure 2 and 3: Benito Mussolini pictured shirtless, hiking in the Dolomites; Vladimir Putin, shirtless, riding a horse (Swan, 2020; Deuzhinin, 2009).

4. Theoretical Underpinnings (Literature Review)

How does one begin to theorise about such an under-studied topic as “sportswashing”? In this research paper that is precisely what I have set out to do, by using the question, *Why have autocratic regimes with appalling human rights records from the Gulf States began acquiring English football clubs in recent years?*, as a starting point, I am proposing an inductive approach, whereby an observation about “sportswashing” is made, a pattern in said observation is discovered, leading to the development of a conceptual framework around which a theory or general conclusion may be deduced.

As mentioned, there is still no notable academic or scientific literature on the topic of interest. However, there are various strands of related literature, ranging from the hosting of mega-sports events and sports diplomacy, to the concepts of nation-branding and soft power. By borrowing elements from these varied, yet inter-related topics, we may glean a superior understanding of the empirical phenomenon that is sportswashing.

4.1 Soft Power

The most suitable place to begin, I believe, in order to better understand sportswashing is the concept of soft power. Soft power, as originally conceived by Joseph Nye, is the ability of states to co-opt rather than coerce (i.e. hard power) other states through the shaping of the preferences of said states through the powers of appeal and attraction, which usually takes the form of culture, enterprise, education, engagement, government, and digital power. Conversely, hard power is more concerned with the ability to change an actor's behavior by altering their circumstances, an ode to the realist conception of power centered around the idea of countries using their material resources to manipulate others. Nye (1990) described soft power as when one state gets another to want what it wants as opposed to commanding others what to do. Similar to soft power, Luke (2015) has written about the Third Dimension of Power, that is, the power to shape, influence or determine others' beliefs and desires, thereby securing their compliance. Nye (2004) would go on to say about soft power that the attraction garnered from soft power often leads to acquiescence. Soft power has become a critical tool in the foreign policy arsenals of many nations the world over. Vuving (2009) has conceptualised soft power in both a broad and narrow sense: in the broader sense, soft power is seen as a form of non-military power be that economic strength or cultural power. In the more narrow sense, soft power is equated to cultural influence. Against the backdrop of robust globalising forces, soft power has become even more important, as it becomes more and more obvious that the wielding of economic and/or military power is no longer a sufficient method of power maintenance or augmentation.

The notion of soft power, therefore, offers a useful conceptual context against which one can define and analyse sportswashing, especially so as cultural forms, such as sport, are often the target of purveyors of soft power strategies. Football can therefore be looked upon as a valuable soft power vehicle, a fact amplified by its global cultural, commercial, and political eminence. Soft power is increasingly seen as a form of cultural expansionism/interventionism that strengthens one's reputation and shapes the conduct, impressions, and beliefs other may hold of the nation from which said soft power is emerging (Castro, 2018). Sport, therefore, is a perfect instrument to dilute observed totalitarian regimes by fabricating a liberal, modern, and free ideology and image. The tribal nature of fandom found in sport, and in particular in football, presents a hugely loyal group of people who can quite easily be c-opted and manipulated due to the strong emotional attachment they may have with their preferred club.

Although the generation and application of soft power varies quite significantly depending on the context, the reasons underlying its use, and its target audience, Nye (2008) has still identified the three main sources from which soft power can be extracted and then wielded; a state's foreign policy, its culture, and its political values. All three have an obvious state-centric function (especially foreign policy), however, a state's culture and political values are more prone to influence from civil society and other such non-state actors, thus highlighting the fact that soft power considerations are not solely the domain of states and their governments (Mattern, 2007).

As the exercising of traditional military hard power has become less and less palatable within the international community, often leading to some form of ostracisation, the cultivation of soft power has become increasingly important as a foreign policy tool, especially for smaller states with lesser military capabilities. Such states would, for example, be unable to fend off a significant attacker of its

sovereignty, and as such, will lean on soft power tools as part of its security blueprint. Sajedi (2009) has stated that in these cases, the implementation of soft power through identification with values of peace and rectitude, as well as harmonious cosmopolitan partnerships, can serve as an effective security design. Of course, the utilisation of soft power is not constricted to smaller states with limited hard power resources. China has quite infamously and openly employed an extensive domestic and international soft power strategy, with Kurlantzick (2007) going as far as to say that China's soft power has emerged as the most potent weapon in its foreign policy arsenal.

For Nye (1990) the changing nature of global power structures that emerged from the end of the Cold War, as well as the heightened risk of traditional hard power military deployment, meant that intangible power resources like sports, culture, institutions, and ideology took on an increased importance. By embedding oneself within the international community, conforming to the norms that emanate from such a society, and at least giving the impression of interest in global issues such as democratisation, climate change, and peacebuilding, a nation can position itself as a valuable and useful contributor to world affairs. This in turn will diminish the possibility of hard power confrontation with other states (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015), with such internationalism effectively functioning as a hard power deterrent.

By linking Nye's concept of soft power to sport, and more specifically, to the notion of sportswashing, we may better understand a nation's strategic motivation for purchasing a foreign football club, as well as what they hope to achieve from such an acquisition. For future reference, sportswashing is best understood under the umbrella of soft power.

4.2 Hosting Mega-Sports Events (MSEs)

I propose for the sake of argumentation that the hosting of mega-sport events is a form of sportswashing, similar to the purchasing of a football club, with similar inputs, mechanisms, and outputs. Along these lines, it will be useful to review the current literature on hosting as it will provide useful insights into the inner workings of why states' sportswash in the first place and what they hope to achieve from such actions. Roche (1994) has provided a widely-accepted definition of a mega-sports event, that is, a large-scale sporting event that has a dramatic character, mass popular appeal, and international significance, that are typically organised by a combination of national government and international NGO organisations. This quality makes MSEs an important element in official versions of public culture. There is a consensus that only the (football) FIFA World Cup and the IOC Olympic Games qualify as MSEs with other international tournaments for other sports such as cricket, basketball, or hockey (and the UEFA Champions League) being classified as secondary events (O'Brien and Gardiner 2006). The international significance of MSEs, their ability to captivate global audiences, and the involvement of governments in the production of such events makes them an important element to consider when analysing concepts such as soft power and sportswashing.

The hosting of a mega-sports event (MSE) is widely recognised as a clear and decisive mark of prosperity and progress. Indeed many scholars have established a clear link between the hosting of such events and soft power relating to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar (Dorsey, 2016), the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics in Brazil (Rocha, 2017), the 2014 Winter Olympics in Russia (Wolfe, 2016), as well as the paradigmatic case of China's hosting of the Olympics in both 2008 and 2022 (Caffrey, 2013). The hosting of such events offers nations a powerful opportunity to increase their soft power stock through the enrichment of national identity and pride, as well as through the global cultural demonstration the nation receives from television and internet views (Grix and Lee, 2013).

Additionally, MSEs are noted for the feel-good factor they generate for the host's citizens, as well as the international prestige, that is, an indispensable source of power (Grix et al., 2021), that may be extracted from hosting. Indeed several cities, regions, and nations have used MSEs as a springboard for announcing themselves on the world stage, South Korea and Catalonia being notable examples (Manzenreiter, 2015).

The successful hosting of these world events highlights a nation's competence and dependability, while also emphasising said nation's ability to carry out large-scale and highly complex projects, as such, developing and non-Western countries such as Brazil, China, and South Africa, have taken a particular interest in hosting MSEs. In all of these cases, beyond the stated benefits of soft power projection and augmentation, the successful hosting of a World Cup or an Olympics has signaled the host's arrival as an emerging power in both its own region, and the wider international system. Emerging and/or developing powers also leverage the high visibility one receives from hosting in order to speed up their entry into more advanced markets, thus closing the gap with more mature and developed nations.

Grix and Lee (2013) have also stated that hosting MSEs provides opportunities for developing nations to enhance their agency in global affairs, allowing these nations to affect matters beyond their immediate contiguous neighborhood. Indeed, there was a time when states were reluctant to host such capital-intensive events, with MSEs being predominantly staged by wealthy Western countries. However, the increased political relevance of sport as a low-cost method of image and reputation enhancement has meant that developing and emerging nations are increasingly interested in hosting MSEs. To this end, competition for hosting rights has become extremely intense (Brown and Massey, 2001). In as much as sports may be a reflection of politics, the heightened influence of developing countries in such matters could be seen as a reflection of their increased importance in international affairs. As the order of the international political economy has shifted increasingly towards the East, the Southern Hemisphere, and the BRICS, in recent years, we can also observe a notable change in the order of the international politics that underpins the sporting world, the aforementioned economic shift only further reinforcing this structural change in sport. It seems that the successful hosting of an MSE can provide ample evidence of an emerging power's rising agency in wider global affairs.

MSEs can also act as a platform from which nations can display their technological and developmental advancement. Importantly, Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) have identified how MSEs reflect a nation's "glocal" consciousness, that is, they can capture how a given nation's culture can effectively engage with wider global processes. The leveraging of sport in this manner allows hosts to inform other nations about the social, political, and cultural similarities (as well as differences) between themselves and their fellow members of the global community. This in turn can elevate a nation's glocal consciousness, by shrinking the perceived tangible and intangible disparities between countries. Similarly, Grix and Lee (2013) have proposed that hosting states use the soft power from MSEs to portray themselves as similar to other states by representing common sporting norms and values that lie at the heart of international MSEs. The authors premised this on the assertion that likeness between states is crucial in attracting others into one's sphere of influence. Through the action of hosting, hosts can therefore artificially manufacture attraction by posing as champions of global norms associated with sport such as fair play. Additionally, the domestic situation of many emerging powers (Saudi Arabia and human rights abuses, China and autocracy, etc.) means that their national political and/or social values are not desirable and thus cannot be leveraged for soft power purposes (Qobo, 2013). This further motivates such countries to get involved in sports and MSEs, as it gives them the chance to muster attraction and goodwill even though they promote unappealing political and/or social values at home.

Obviously, the strategy of hosting MSEs and other sporting events does not always pay off, and come sometimes be catastrophic failures. For example, Bahrain's hosting of Formula 1 races in 2012/13

resulted in the country's authoritarian nature being put under the spotlight and as such, saw the country (and Formula 1) receive heavy criticism. Sadly, Formula 1, an organisation renowned for its dealings with dictators and other such human rights abusers, continues to host races in Bahrain to this day, while the Bahraini government denies any allegations of sportswashing (Richards, 2020). Astonishingly Formula 1 has just extended its contract with Bahrain in a record deal stretching until 2036 (Formula 1, 2022), this despite continued allegations of shocking human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Amnesty, 2021).

Regardless of the inherent risk, the hosting of (mega) sports events is an integral part of many sportswashing strategies we see today. As mentioned earlier, 2022 is an unprecedented year for sportswashing, with the world's two premier mega sporting events, the World Cup and the Olympics, being hosted by two authoritarian regimes in the shape of Qatar and China. As such, in order to better understand sportswashing, it is important to understand the dynamics that motivate nations to host such capital-intensive events in the first place.

4.3 Nation Branding

Countries around the globe are increasingly aware of the need to shed a positive light on their own country's performance on what essentially amounts to a beauty pageant in front of an international audience, with Pilon (2005) stating that traditional propaganda has lost its effectiveness, with countries now needing to present themselves in a more nuanced and sensitive manner. This process is what has become to be known as nation branding (Olins, 2002), and it has been utilised by countries in one form or another for centuries. For example, the 17th-century French empire recognised its reputation as a major source of power and as such went to great pains to modify its image abroad (Melissen, 2005). Within the context of globalisation it is essential that countries oversee and direct their brand such that they may remain competitive in a hyper-competitive environment. Effective nation branding can therefore position a country such that it may realise the benefits of increased investment and tourism. Anholt-GfK Roper (2010) has provided the caveat that a nation's brand or image must be based on something recognisable, for example, as a centre for sporting and/or commercial excellence, rather than just simply resting on a strong public relations campaign.

In a deeper sense, nation branding can be seen as an overarching national branding strategy that guides a nation's strategic vision and provides for said vision to be backed and strengthened by all communications emanating from said nation to the rest of the world (Anholt, 1998). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is a perfect example of this. Nation branding is thus centered on the transformation of international opinion on a given country. As many nations grapple with archaic reputations owing to economic and/or cultural development that may have passed them by, it is, therefore, necessary for these nations to re-brand themselves. Nation branding can thus be seen as a key component of a nation's overall soft power strategy, as effective nation branding will enhance a nation's image, which in turn augments that nation's soft power. State's that must contend with negative national stereotypes and images owing to past historical events, human rights abuses, war crimes, or for example, colonialism and the British or the Holocaust and the Germans, will have a lot more to gain from effectively leveraging the soft power of nation branding to alter external perceptions of their image. Indeed, in the wake of the Iraq War in 2003, the Americans would go on a drive to win the hearts and minds of other state's as it battled with a negative image owing to its military intervention in that conflict (Grix and Himpler, 2007).

Nation branding generally takes one of two forms; the first is grounded in more traditional marketing practices and can be equated to destination marketing and place branding. The second form is concerned with political and diplomatic realms, for example, using nation branding to reverse the

negative Saudi sentiment that is found around the world (Fan, 2010). Some have conflated the concept of nation branding with that of public diplomacy, when in reality, there are clear differences. Nation branding clearly has a focus in the management of a nation's outward identity, and thus utilises a far more comprehensive approach than the more traditional notion of public diplomacy, which is more concerned with using traditional diplomacy as a tool for securing foreign policy goals. Nation branding meanwhile utilises marketing techniques to pitch a state's image to foreign publics. And while the lines between nation branding and public diplomacy are becoming increasingly blurred, the pivotal role of the state in leveraging sport to achieve non-sport-related objectives is clear. Sport's nation-building qualities (promotion of national pride and identity) also mean that it has massive potential to effectively contribute to a nation's brand and/or image (Roper, 2011).

By looking at the theories on which nation branding hinges, we can gain valuable insights into the related concept of sportswashing. These are, after all, two complementary ideas. I personally prefer to see nation branding as a theoretical precursor to sportswashing, both sharing many of the same foundational assumptions, with sportswashing just being a more nuanced and developed form of nation branding that is evidently solely concerned with the world of sport, nation branding being a broader, but no less useful lens through which we can understand how and why nations opt to portray themselves in a certain way depending on the context at the time.

4.4 Sports Diplomacy

Diplomacy amongst states took on much greater significance following the 9/11 attacks by Al Qaeda in New York City, as a way of mobilising (soft power) resources to connect with and engage other states (Nye, 2008). Diplomacy as an academic concept can be viewed in the traditional hierarchical state-centric approach, on the one hand, and in the updated network environment approach in which many stakeholders, both state and non-state, interact (Hocking, 2005). This updated model reflects a wider shift in governance and diplomatic structures from an emphasis on big government to one focused on the idea of working both in and through networks. Tangible evidence of this shift can be seen in the recent proliferation of partnerships, advisory boards, councils, commissions and other such para-state entities (Marsh, 2008). The non-state nature of this "new" diplomacy has seen the rising involvement of sporting organisations like the IOC and FIFA, who owing to their non-state qualities, are not responsible to states and their governments, who in turn cannot exert as much control over such bodies as they would like.

Indeed, the nexus between sports, diplomacy, and wider politics is well established. Dating back to the first Ancient Olympics, a so-called "Truce" was established to offer traveling athletes and spectators safe passage from attack throughout the duration of the games (Golden, 2011). It is no exaggeration to say that the universality of sport allows it to eclipse rancorous diplomatic relations and offer an extremely useful path through which meaningful dialogue may occur beyond the realm of the back rooms in the halls of power throughout the world. To this end, a quote from Nelson Mandela (2000) comes to mind: "sport has the power to change the world..., to inspire..., to unite people in a way that little else does". Sports diplomacy is thus a tool used by governments to achieve foreign policy goals, that is, the political use of sport. In certain contexts, sports diplomacy has proven to be a potent diplomatic tool, although its use is not widespread, against the backdrop of globalisation, it is becoming an increasingly attractive method of achieving mutually-beneficial outcomes in a more informal setting than traditional diplomacy may offer. The widespread popularity of sport, its soft power appeal, its provision of an alternative diplomatic pathway, and its espousment of universally accepted values that can bridge cultural divides, sets sports diplomacy out as a bespoke, diplomatic channel that can bring about previously untenable results (Murray, 2013).

Nation branding is an important aspect of a state's public diplomacy, which traditionally was directed at foreign publics and has usually fallen under the jurisdiction of states and their governments as they attempt to forge an admissible and sympathetic sentiment in foreign environments, such that these publics are primed to be more receptive to the policies and interests of a given nation. Many Olympics and other such sporting events since have served as vehicles for diplomatic boycotts (US boycott of 1980 Moscow Olympics and Russian boycott of LA Olympics), punishments (apartheid-era South Africa), and even as tools to bind states together (South-Korea and Japan World Cup in 2022), all such events displaying the serious and symbolic role sports can play in the relationships between nations (Murray, 2012). Sportswashing can thus be conceptualised as a tool of sports diplomacy, which is also closely linked to soft power.

Soft power, hosting MSEs, branding the state, and diplomacy through sport are all key pillars of SA and the UAE's sportswashing strategy. Together they combine to become the underlying processes that work beneath the surface when sportswashing is in motion. They are, so to speak, the mechanics of sportswashing that will aid us in achieving a superior understanding of this misconceived phenomenon.

5. Case Context

5.1 Newcastle United

Founded in 1892, NUFC is the ninth most successful English club in history (as measured by total number of trophies won) (Brus, 2015), however, the club has not won a major domestic trophy now since 1955. Ranked 17th in the world in terms of revenue production by a football club, NUFC was at one stage during the 1998/99 season the fifth largest football club in the world, and only second in England to the commercial behemoth that is Manchester United (BBC, 1999). Following the club's entry into the Premier League in the 1993/94 season under the management of Kevin Keegan and Sir Kenny Dalglish, the club would go on to secure two consecutive second-place finishes in the league on the back of the exploits of the competition's greatest ever goal scorer, Alan Shearer, who had arrived at the club for a world record fee of £15 million (Randall, 1996). In the following years and right up to the present day, NUFC could be described as a lower-mid table team, frequently embroiled in relegation battles (relegated in 2008/09 and 2015/16), with sporadic and seemingly arbitrary strong seasons (5th in 2011/12, as well as a rich vein of form between 2001-2004 when the club finished in 4th, 3rd, and 5th).

In 2007 the club was purchased by English billionaire, Mike Ashley. Initially a popular figure with fans, he was frequently pictured donning a Newcastle kit and drinking with supporters in local pubs, as well as joining them in the stands at home and away games. However, following a series of clashes with managers and supporters, two relegations, and a failed transfer policy, the relationship quickly soured. His 14-year reign would go on to be remembered as one of the club's darkest periods, one embodied by extreme frustration, hate, and controversy (Cleland and Dixon, 2015).

It is against the backdrop of such dissatisfaction that the Saudi-led takeover of the club has occurred and it is in part because of these grievances that tens of thousands of Newcastle fans have welcomed their new owners with huge smiles and open arms. This despite the widespread acknowledgment (and now tacit acceptance) of their new owner's abominable human rights record, involvement in the murder of the dissident journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, and what the UN has described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis in Yemen, stemming from Saudi-involvement in the war there. Indeed the

Saudis have responded by saying that the PIF is in no way linked to the Saudi state, this despite the fact that MBS is the PIF's chairman. A legally-binding assurance that the Saudi state will not intervene in the running of Newcastle, seemingly enough to pass the Premier League's porous ownership test (Panja and Smith, 2021). Critics of the Saudi regime are in turn, dismayed at what could only be described as the handing over of a cultural institution to an autocrat, in what is the latest example of football's canonisation of capital and unabashed fealty towards treasure, in an industry where cash is king.

In the hours and days following the breaking of the story that the PIF had in fact acquired NUFC, thousands of Geordies streamed into the centre of Newcastle to St.James Park (infamously renamed the Sports Direct Arena in honor of previous owner, Mike Ashely's sporting goods business). The images that followed reverberated around the world, as scenes of unbridled joy were tempered by fans wearing traditional Saudi thobes and kaffiyehs, their shoulders adorned with the Saudi insignia, the shahada, announcing one's acceptance of Muhammad as God's prophet. Ignorance is indeed bliss. A survey with Newcastle United Supporter's Trust (2021) revealed 97% of fans were in favor of the Saudi acquisition, a resounding victory for success on the pitch over morals off it.



Figure 4: *Newcastle fans celebrating the Saudi-led takeover (Mazzagatti, 2021)*

It does not take a genius however to see that the Saudis have not purchased NUFC out of their sheer love of the beautiful game, nor for the views one is afforded when taking a walk along the River Tyne. Newcastle is simply a pawn within a much bigger game, as Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) has recognised the ability of sport to launder a state's tarnished image. He may be late to the party, his Gulf neighbors in Qatar and Abu Dhabi already a decade and a half into their well-organised soft-power sportswashing campaigns. Such strategies have bought them great reputational success, the 2022 World Cup, Paris Saint-Germain, and Manchester City representing their crown jewels. MBS however heads the House of Saud, whose wealth dwarves even that of Qatar's House of Thani and Abu Dhabi's Nahyan. So while he may be a few years behind, his intention is to spend heavily,

evident from the most recent January transfer window, where 131 million Euro was spent on five players, shattering the previous record for a sum spent in the mid-season transfer period (transfermarkt.com, 2022).

All things point to further spending, until people think of Saudi Arabia and football in a positive light before they think of Saudi Arabia and butchered journalists, public executions, and starving Yemeni children. MBS is desperately in need of a major public relations win and through NUFC, he has an effective vehicle through which he may sportswash Saudi Arabia's tarnished global image with its seemingly limitless supply of petrodollars. And while the Saudis are doing nothing new by simply borrowing from the playbook of Qatar and Abu Dhabi, their takeover of NUFC has certainly caused an unprecedented level of international outrage (when compared with their Gulf neighbours) given the systemic human rights violations that have been widely reported in a situation that appears to be deteriorating, rather than improving. Their timing, it seems, could not be much worse, inviting an additional layer of scrutiny to Saudi Arabia and the takeover.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that MBS and his Kingdom are facing somewhat of an existential crisis; the oil will eventually run out, and increasing environmental consciousness amongst the global population has further highlighted the need to reduce dependency on liquid gold, a fact made all the more bare by Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine. MBS has responded in kind with a multi-pronged sportswashing strategy with NUFC at its helm, but also other major investments totaling at least \$1.5 billion (Grant Liberty, 2021) in Formula 1, the WWE, golf, and tennis. Coupled with recent social reforms surrounding women's rights, such as the right to drive and attend sports events or cinemas, MBS is attempting to enact massive change within his country in a concerted attempt to transform its image, from a hyper-conservative, oppressive, and radical Islamic hotbed to a postmodern regional hegemon founded on more palatable so-called "Western" values. This grand plan has manifested itself in Vision2030, an overarching blueprint through which every element of the Saudi state will be reconceptualised and transformed as its moves from being a resource-based economy, to one that is directed by entertainment, tourism, and sport.

The takeover of NUFC is a mere microcosm of the problem of shady capital taking over football. Indeed it could be said that the sale of NUFC to the Saudi PIF is a reflection of a wider moral slide within English society, a country which famed anti-Mafia author, Roberto Saviano, labeled the world's most corrupt (Carrier, 2016). London has long been a hot-bed for financial crime, with Kupfer (2021) describing the networks of enablers there as living to serve criminals, while also reminding us of former Prime Minister David Cameron's charm offensive to solicit MBS on the back of the £20 billion pounds worth of arms sales going from the UK to SA since the war in Yemen (Campaign Against Arms Trade, 2020). Current PM, Boris Johnson, would go on to defend these sales in front of parliament in 2017. It should not be surprising then that following the Brexit faux pas and the resulting loss of investment that the acceptance of dirty money has almost become a national policy. The UK is open for business, no matter where or who from, as long as the price is right. The latest chapter in football capitalism has truly begun.

5.1a New "Castle", Magpies, and Hippocampi



Figure 5: NUFC's club crest, cradled by the two hippocampi (Newcastle United, 2017)

Metaphors abound when one takes a closer look into the fabric of Newcastle. A cursory glance of Newcastle United Football Club's (NUFC) badge reveals two unusual winged horses, with mermaid-like tails, straddling either side of the city crest, which is, intuitively, a castle. Upon further research, I found these were hippocampi, a mythological creature from Ancient Greece and Rome, that appeared in Homer's *Iliad*, as pulling Poseidon's (Neptune in Roman mythology) chariot across the surface of the sea as he went about his celestial affairs (Thompson, 1987). Hippocampi were believed to provide safe passage from the aquatic world onto dry land for seafarers. The "Toon Army", Newcastle's world-famous fervent fan base, will be hoping that the Saudi PIF will deliver their club a similar fate as the hippocampi once did to ancient sailors; safe passage from the doldrums of English football, to the promised land of European football, and beyond.

The club's nickname, the "Magpies", is another facet of the club that is heavily imbued with somewhat ironic symbolism. Named so due to their kits resemblance to the black and white stripes of the same bird, the Magpie is widely regarded as one of the world's most intelligent creatures with the caveat that its intelligence has seen it become associated with opportunism, deceit, illusion, and an obsession with shiny and valuable objects. Deception and opportunism are just two of the charges we often see leveled against the Saudi hierarchy, for amongst other things, their involvement in the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, their tacit involvement in the Yemeni War, their dubious human rights record, mistreatment of women and the LGBTQ+ community, the list goes on. The recent trend of billionaire's buying up football clubs as their new "play-things" is painfully analogous to the magpie's enthusiasm for all this glossy.

Then there is the city itself, the capital of England's North-East, working-class and proud. Newcastle, England's most northern major city, lies closer to Scotland than it does to the next major cities of Leeds and Manchester. A post-industrial city, whose fortunes have ebbed and flowed with that of its port, people hailing from Newcastle, known as "Geordies", have a unique sense of identity grounded in the region's isolationist and resistive roots, with the area's inhabitants even having their own regional dialect, "Geordie" (Durkin, 2015). What a sharp contrast then are the exuberant and gregarious Geordies to their new footballing deities, the aloof and conservative Saudis. Will this marriage of convenience bear fruit or fizzle out into obscurity?

And finally, what is in a name? For Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), the crown prince and de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia and head of the House of Saud, he will be hoping Newcastle will become his New-Castle in the United Kingdom, one from which he can extend and exert his newly-purchased influence. To make an amendment to an old saying, money cannot buy you happiness, but it can change the subject. This is precisely what MBS will be hoping for, that his outlay on NUFC will

reshape the narrative surrounding the Kingdom over which he now unofficially presides, while also affording him some leverage with Boris Johnson's government.

5.2 Manchester City

Founded just 12 years before NUFC in 1880 by a local Mancunian vicar's daughter, Anna Connell, in order to keep labourers and those without jobs away from the temptation of alcohol, MCFC is now the fifth most successful club in the history of English football (Williams, 2019). Barring a golden era in the 1960s under the stewardship of Joe Mercer and Malcolm Allison, when the club collected various domestic trophies, and its first (and only) European trophy, the club would go on to experience an extended period of stagnation before being relegated and eventually ending up in the third division of the Football League as recently as 1998 (Rich, 2018).

In 1994 MCFC was taken over by Francis Lee, a legendary City striker from the club's heyday in the 1960s/70s. In a corporate deal that saw Lee succeed the much-abhorred Peter Swales 20 year reign, Lee and co. bought 1/3 of the shares in MCFC Ltd. for £3 million, while also loaning the club an additional £3 million. Soon after, Lee announced his intention to float the club on the stock market, a common process in football during the 1990s, and a safe way of securing a financial withdrawal for shareholders in enabling them to realise personal profits (Michie, 2000). In preparation for the floatation, a new holding company, MC Plc. was formed, under which MCFC Ltd. would operate. The rationale behind this was that MCFC Ltd. would continue to have to follow the rules of the Football Association and the Football League, while MC Plc. would no longer be under their remit. The main manifestation of this company shakeup would be that shareholders would no longer be restricted in their ability to take money out of the club.

In 2007 the club was purchased by the ex-prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, who having been deposed in a coup d'état, accused of corruption and severe human rights abuses, would almost immediately drag the club to the brink of insolvency (Millward, 2011). The club's fortunes would change however in 2008, when the royal family of Abu Dhabi, through its private equity firm, the Abu Dhabi United Group, purchased the club for £150 million. Previously known to be perpetually in the shadow of its crosstown rivals, Manchester United, the takeover would usher in a new era of unprecedented investment, and subsequent success. In the immediate aftermath to the takeover, MCFC broke the English transfer record by signing the Brazilian, Robinho, for £32.5 million (Geey, 2011). At the next available opportunity during the summer transfer window of 2009, the club would splash over £100 million on a handful of players as their fortunes in the league began to improve. Two years into the new regime 300 million Euros have been spent on a new crop of players. The club would regularly (and continues to) top European transfer outlay tables. The strategy is an uncomplicated one: inject as much money as is humanly possible into MCFC until it is competitive.

After 44 trophy-less years, in 2011, the East Manchester club would win the FA Cup, followed by the league in 2012, when a last-minute Sergio Aguero strike would steal the title from the clutches of Manchester United in one of the most dramatic moments to take place in any sport. Over the next decade the club would go on to win four more domestic leagues and a handful of domestic cups, as MCFC cemented its place as the dominant force in English football. Throughout this period, and particularly during the time of legendary Spanish manager, Pep Guardiola, the team would break several longstanding records, such as becoming the first team to surpass 100 points in a single league

campaign, the first team to complete a domestic treble, as well as a domestic quadruple. Despite this success, the club has consistently disappointed in European competitions, and effort which culminated in reaching (and losing) the Champions League final in 2021. MCFC is now the fifth-biggest revenue-generating club in the world, as well as being the fifth most valuable club in world football (Deloitte, 2021), with the club operating under the umbrella of the City Football Group, a holding company with football clubs all over the world, ranging from New York to Yokohama. Few could have imagined such a meteoric rise.

Following the initial flurry of transfer activity, and once it was clear the club was headed in a new direction, the Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG) was quickly invited to work with Manchester's austerity-hit city council, which was in desperate need of funding. This unusual relationship between a quasi-city state's sovereign wealth fund and an English local authority, led to the establishment of the Manchester Life partnership, a property investment project under which hundreds of apartments were developed in two of the city's poorest neighborhoods (de Noronha and Silver, 2022). However, all is not as it seems, with details emerging of 1000-year leases on public land (a la the British and Chinese playbook), massive costs to the taxpayer, public loans for the venture, and a failure to provide affordable or social housing in a city suffering from an acute housing crisis (Noring et al, 2021). It is easy to therefore see why some are concerned about this lopsided alliance, especially when it comes to the negotiation table; how does a city council compete with a powerful emirate backed by unimaginable wealth. It seems like the desperate necessity for funding and regeneration attached to a neoliberal economic agenda are outweighing any moral concerns. The wheels are already in motion for the same to happen in Newcastle, where the similarities are striking: council executive Pat Ritchie had been pushing for the Saudi take-over a year before it even happened, indicating that it could have a transformational effect on the austerity-hit city.

Manchester Life is just one string of Abu Dhabi's soft power bow, which has seen Manchester and Abu Dhabi become so inextricably linked through investments, branding, and shady deals, that many of the city's inhabitants have been effectively mobilised by the emirates sportswashing efforts. To the extent that when the Abu Dhabi regime is criticised online for say, a human rights abuse, a legion of MCFC fans, alongside Abu Dhabi's plethora of troll factories, will be the first to defend their masters (Cherkaoui, 2018). And unless major steps are taken to prevent it, it will not be long before the same thing happens to the city of Newcastle and its people. This issue clearly goes beyond a football club, or even a large British city. This is a reflection of a much bigger problem, deeply rooted within a British society that has become obsessed with money.



Figure 6: A supposed Saudi-troll factory from the documentary *"The Dissident"* (2021). (Keram, n.d.)

Nowadays, the symbiosis between MCFC and Abu Dhabi is almost complete. The team's sky blue kit is adorned with the UAE's state airline, Etihad, while the club's stadium, formerly known as the City of Manchester Stadium, is now known simply as the Etihad (Al Masari et al., 2013). Take a cursory look around the ground on a matchday and the Abu Dhabi's state telecoms company, Etisalat, as well as its national tourism authority, are ubiquitous. Indeed, MCFC has become the crown jewel of the UAE's soft power strategy, becoming a fantastic advertisement for all things Abu Dhabi-related. Underneath the glitz and glamor of MCFC and the Premier League, an entire city is slowly becoming locked into a long-term relationship with an autocratic regime, a development the UK government can surely not afford?

For students of the industrial revolution, which had its roots in England's North, and in particular in Manchester (and to a lesser extent, Newcastle), the term "Manchester Capitalism/Liberalism" will be a familiar one, as the embodiment of greed and exploitation in the name of profit (Hesselmann, 2008). Schafer and Ott () defined it as a most extreme form of liberal capitalism that completely ignored the social question. It could now be said that Abu Dhabi has ushered in a new era of Manchester Capitalism, spending and (supposedly) cheating its way to the top of the English football pyramid by forging an extremely lucrative sporting dominion that has flagrantly and skillfully broken a myriad of rules on the way to footballing supremacy.

By the time MCFC secured their first Premier League title in 2012, just under four years after the Abu Dhabi takeover, the nouveau-riche owners had already invested a staggering 1.3 billion Euros into the club (Der Spiegel, 2018), an unprecedented level of financing, even when compared to Russian oligarch, Roman Abramovich's venture into London club, Chelsea. And while the first domestic title was considered by many, and none more so than the MC fans, to be a true sporting miracle, it would soon become the norm. Such is the level of ambition and ruthlessness in the Abu Dhabi hierarchy that less than 12 months after masterminding the club's first title in almost 50 years, the renowned Italian manager, Robert Mancini, was unceremoniously sacked.

In the days and weeks following Mancini's departure and amid mounting concern over competitive distortion in European football (Der Spiegel, 2018), as well as increasing problems relating to debt levels and bankruptcy in most clubs without a wealthy benefactor, UEFA introduced new budgetary rules called the Financial Fair Play (FFP) rules (Budzinski, 2014). The main premise of the rules is that clubs should not spend beyond their means in the pursuit of success (or survival) and that clubs should therefore not be allowed to spend more than they make. Without having to say as much it was obvious that MCFC were to be one of the primary targets of these new measures.

There would be no panic however as some creative accounting paired with dodgy sponsorship deals would signal the true beginning of MCFC's "we do what we want" mentality (Der Spiegel, 2018). In the end their main gambit was really quite simple, the club would misrepresent spending on for example, player transfer fees, as sponsorship money that appears as an income on balance sheets, and thus bypasses punishment from UEFA. The issue was/is that this so-called sponsorship money was actually sourced from the coffers of the Al Nayhan family, who, through a complex web of lies and state-controlled subsidiary companies, are able to generate a comparative advantage for MCFC that could only be matched by PSG and their fellow Gulf owners, Qatar. Indeed, both MCFC and PSG were sanctioned by UEFA in 2014, with both negotiating favourable settlements that amounted to a negligible level of punishment for their contraventions as the two clubs feigned their innocence.

Thus in a miraculously short time period, petro-dollars have propelled and transformed Manchester City from a small-time, unstable club that was insignificant to anyone outside of the city of Manchester, in a matter of seasons, to a star-studded, global powerhouse, with a stake to be one of the greatest club sides ever assembled, in the midst of an unprecedented period of domestic dominance that has delivered several league titles and cup wins. Do not be fooled however that this success was built on the back of anything other than obnoxiously large sums of money.

5.3 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is known worldwide, as the cradle of Sunni Islam, while some of the earliest signs of human life have been traced to this historic part of the world, where several great ancient civilisations have hailed from. Indeed, SA claims to represent an Islamic identity that applies all aspects of the Sharia in the strictest sense. In its current guise, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was however only established in 1932 (40 years after NUFC) as an absolute monarchy under the Al Saud family (Maisel, 2018). Since then the regime has been characterised by high levels of authoritarianism and extreme social and religious conservatism owing to its espousment of Wahhabi Islam, which has a significant influence on Saudi culture and life (Metz, 1992). SA has been characterised as a rentier state that uses patronage networks and economic handouts to gain the loyalty of its subjects (Faudot, 2019), who have in effect entered into a social contract with the state in return for economic security. Oil was first discovered here in 1938, with Saudi Arabia since coming to control the world's second-biggest oil reserves, as well as the sixth biggest gas reserves (EIA, 2021). SA is now the Middle East's largest economy, while also boasting the largest population in the Arabian Gulf. SA's strategic location in the middle of the erratic Arabic region has made it the subject of much academic and media attention.

The rise of the Crown Prince MBS from minister of defence to de facto ruler has coincided with a massive modernisation drive, which has also resulted in a great reduction in the power and influence of religious authorities. At the very center of MBS's strategy is Vision 2030. A blueprint setting out SA's post-oil future, in which the country shifts from fossil fuels towards a Western-facing high-tech green economy (Nurunnabi, 2017). The underlying message is one of modernisation built on three pillars. MBS intends to drag SA kicking and screaming into the 21st century.



Figure 7: A poster for MBS's Vision 2030 (Cockerill, 2020)

Pillar One is a vibrant society. The reality on the ground is this could not be further from the truth: the Shia minority is persecuted and oppressed, prominent, and even moderate, public figures, such as academics and religious authorities, are arbitrarily imprisoned and punished. The banning of NGOs has devastated the humanitarian and civil society spheres, while both Saudi and non-Saudi citizens alike are deprived of a plethora of human rights, with Grant Liberty (2021) reporting that some members of society have been imprisoned for simply questioning Vision 2030.

Pillar Two is a thriving economy. Again, the chasm between what is true and what is said to be true is vast. How can an economy, or a state for that matter, be said to be thriving when it does not offer a morcel of equality to women, non-Sunni Muslims, and other minority groups (Sallam, 2013)? When the oil runs dry, SA will struggle to flourish on the back of an archaic patriarchy.

Pillar Three is an ambitious nation. While MBS could, and has, been described as an ambitious leader, I believe a better description is insolent, misguided haughtiness. Ambition implies a willingness to adhere to internationally held values and norms, treaties, and laws, such that one becomes a respectable member of the global community, after which, appropriate ambitions can be realised. SA mocks the few global treaties and laws into which it has entered, while simply opting out of the vast majority of other arrangements that all other civilised and diplomatic nations hold in such a high regard, most of which are considered essential to be considered a progressive and modern member of the international community.

Vision 2030, therefore, appears to be nothing more than a cover-up, presented in an extravagantly plush package, of a utopian dream. The reality on the ground is clearly far more dystopian, and while some will argue the sheer financial muscle of SA will enable it to achieve some of Vision 2030's aims, it seems likely that any positive development emanating from it, will be to the advantage of a select few, at the expense of any meaningful political or social reform for the majority of Saudi citizens.

Saudi Arabia is also currently at odds with the "West". The relationship at best could be described as tense or strained, with outside actors unhappy with SA's confrontational behavior and its use of controversial hard power tools, both domestically and internationally. The sporting-related diplomacy

that may be garnered from SA's sportswashing program seems to be a critical part of SA's longer-term vision to augment its status, both as a regional hegemon in the Gulf, and as a rising power in the international arena. There can be no doubt though that SA's capacity to transmit its influence is severely curtailed by domestic issues and by its hard power reputation due to its involvement in Yemen. On top of these obvious limitations to its power projection capabilities, SA (and the UAE for that matter) must contend with negative Orientalist images and stereotypes (Said, 2014) of its culture and way of life. Saudi authorities have thus identified that engagement and active participation with the global sporting industry is an effective way through which it may better promote understanding and acceptance of its distinctive culture, while also showcasing how its unique society is willing and able to contribute to the global world order.

5.4 What Crimes Does Saudi Arabia Stand Accused Of?

5.4a The War in Yemen

A Saudi-led coalition bombing campaign has brought death, destruction, and famine to the Middle East's poorest nation (Laub and Robinson, 2016). The UN (2021) estimates that over 250,000 people have perished in the conflict. Meanwhile, the UK continues to sell huge quantities of arms to SA and has extensive and deep business ties with the Kingdom (CAAT, 2021). Where does the buck stop in such a situation? Can the UK government continue its business relationship with SA, while telling it that it cannot purchase a British football club? The hypocrisy underlying the entire situation is further exacerbated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's frequent business calls with MBS and the recent proposal for a UK-Gulf Cooperation Council Free Trade Agreement as the UK reels from the effects of Brexit.

Justification for the war in Yemen arose from the Arab Spring, from which any potential "hangover" in SA was quickly quashed in what was perhaps the country least affected by the protests and rebellions that shook much of the Arab world in the early 2010s, a stark reminder of the regime's tight grip on its citizens. The Saudi monarchy has been noted for its remarkable resilience, especially when compared to other GCC monarchies, as well as Morocco and Jordan, which Al-Rasheed (2016) attributes to external support (particularly from the Americans), satisfaction with the leadership, a smooth royal succession ensuring no power struggles or challenges, and the ability of the state to redistribute oil wealth among the citizenry in the form of benefits. Somewhat perversely, Al-Rasheed (2013) has also reported that the uprisings provided SA with a perfect opportunity to further tighten internal security, although Islamic empowerment arising from these revolutions did threaten SA credentials as the sole Islamic model in the region.

On the matter of the resilience of the Saudi leadership, Yom and Gause (2012) highlight how Gulf monarchies specifically develop stability through a rentier state framework, whereby rent from oil subdues the population through welfare and financial redistributive mechanisms that pacify any potential nonconformity. At the same time, such states are more vulnerable to exogenous shocks such as oil price fluctuations. We can see this rentier state model in effect when SA utilises its resources to lower demand for the freedom of speech and political participation. SA has effectively leveraged its oil wealth as a tool for coercion. However, dynasties such as the House of Saud cannot solely rely on their petrodollars, so must therefore seek out strategic alliances that can be reinforced by said wealth.

Saudi leadership looked upon the Arab Spring as a threat to its carefully manicured status-quo and its egoistic quest for influence and supremacy, with events in the Maghreb and the wider MENA potentially reducing its sphere of influence. Dissent in contiguous Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria is viewed as a direct threat to Saudi security. Internally, the uprisings produced some online petitions for political reform (these were quickly censored), while also having the effect of stirring up some discontent between hardline and liberal Islamists on SA's commitment to Islamic principles (Steinberg, 2014). Such religious polarisation could even be seen as a positive development for SA's rulers, as it reduces the chance of a unified front crystallising in opposition to its autarkic control.

We can thus see that the Saudi regime has managed to maintain a fragile hold of power, in the short term at least. However, further unrest in the Middle East, coupled with hardening internal divisions, means that going forward, there are clearly a myriad of combustible issues that will need to be dealt with by the monarchy. Additionally, the Saudi leadership is playing a dangerous game in its propagation of ideological and social divisions, which have been shown in similar contexts around the region, to have a tendency to explode into fiery sectarianism, the dissolution of traditional national borders, and even in some cases, the breakdown of sovereign states.

5.4b The Murder of Jamal Khashoggi

Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi dissident, a renowned journalist and political activist. Khashoggi was notoriously murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on the personal orders of MBS, a fact confirmed by the CIA (The Guardian, 2018). The sheer brutality of this act of political silencing captured the attention of the world and was a crucial turning point in the global perception of MBS as a leader; he quickly went from being seen in a positive light as an unprecedented reformer, to his current negative image as a vicious and authoritarian tyrant. Khashoggi's fiancée, Hatice Cengiz, has pleaded with the Premier League to block the takeover of NUCF by the Saudi PIF, citing MBS's involvement in his assassination (Montague, 2021). The plea, unsurprisingly, has fallen on deaf ears.



Figure 8: MBS pictured with murdered dissident, Jamal Khashoggi (Kirchgaessner, 2021).

Khashoggi's murder has had a powerful impact on Middle Eastern politics. Saudi Arabia, hell-bent on achieving regional dominance has taken various critical steps to ensure its leadership and power is not undermined, while its traditional ally, the US, finds itself split between calls for justice and its long-standing (mostly military) support to the Kingdom, with whom it shares a special relationship based on SA supplying it oil in return for robust military support (Gamawa, 2019).

One such step has been SA's renewal of relationships with its Gulf neighbours and the wider Middle East in an attempt to counterbalance calls for punishment from Turkey and Western actors, in what it sees, as an overt attack on the Saudi regime. Despite a (US) Senate resolution personally accusing MBS of ordering the killing, as well as the threat of sanctions, no punishment for any crimes has been forthcoming (Borger, 2018). Former Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, offered a fascinating reason for such inaction, citing SA's importance and special position globally as a holy place for Muslims, asserting that by destabilising SA, one runs the risk of destabilising the entire planet (Landau, 2018).

In light of such scrutiny relating to the journalist's murder, SA has had to alter its behaviour on the international stage, increasingly making use of soft power tools as it engages in an intense foreign policy campaign to shift public opinion. A publicity tour by MBS in order to garner support from SA's Arab neighbours before several public overtures to leaders at a G20 meeting in Buenos Aires, were all actions taken to counteract Western-led condemnation of the Kingdom (Seth, 2018). The Saudi PIF's takeover of NUFC can be looked at in the same light, the purchase effectively buying MBS and his cronies time at the top table with the leaders of the UK's government.

In the meantime, MBS moved to install a close ally as the head of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a means of securing regional stability (Baabood, 2019), while relations with Qatar were patched up following a diplomatic row which led to a Saudi-led blockade of the microstate in 2017. The GCC now represents a united front on all issues pertaining to both Khashoggi's murder, as well as the war in Yemen, the bloc now appearing to effectively be a mouthpiece for MBS's regime. Increased economic integration and an offer to rebuild war-torn Syria gives the impression that SA has somehow leveraged the murder to increase its influence, rebuild regional relationships and advance its own power in the restive Middle East.

5.4c Human Rights Violations

A myriad of human rights organisations have written to the Premier League to communicate their disgust over SA's purchase of NUFC, with many asking the PL, the FA, and the UK government to properly investigate SA's human rights record as part of the league's owners and director suitability test. Amnesty (2021) claims the test does not even mention "human rights" once, and even so, the deal has been structured in such a way that it can easily bypass such a lackadaisical test. The PL ruled that the Saudi PIF was sufficiently separate from the Saudi state that it should pass the owners and directors test, this despite the fact that the PIF is the state-owned sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia and that MBS is its chairman. The PL needs to better understand the dynamics that underpin sportswashing, while also tightening its ownership rules, with the involvement of another sovereign state in English football understandably coming under acute scrutiny.

The list of human rights-related accusations against SA goes on and it is simply beyond the means of this paper to go into detail on all of them but they include the violation of women's rights, the

persecution of the LGBTQ+ community, the incarceration of prisoners of conscience and child prisoners, the withholding of the right to freedom of speech and the right to peacefully protest. Furthermore, Saudi citizens cannot question laws, nor the conduct of their rulers, NGOs and human rights organisations have been banned from operating in the Kingdom, prisoners are frequently mistreated and tortured, while authorities continue to make arbitrary arrests of academics, religious figures, and members of the highly oppressed Shia minority. Indeed, some would even go as far to say that SA is an open prison itself. Meanwhile, in March 2022, 81 men were killed in a mass execution on a single day, as SA continues to flout a myriad of global laws and treaties including the Mandela Rules on the treatment of prisoners, international humanitarian laws, international covenants on civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights (HRW, 2022).

With regards to women's rights, Al-Alhareth et al.,(2015) note how Saudi women are subject to intense societal polarisation, economic marginalisation, and strict rules that control every facet of their daily lives in a deeply entrenched system of gender-based exclusion. Indeed, males, effectively acting as guardians, oversee a woman's movements, health, employment status, and level of education, while the Saudi state enables such subservience at every level of society. The confined role of women reflects SA's adherence to strict Islamic law, which is often used as justification for the mistreatment of females. Furthermore, Islamic doctrine states that the emotionality of women renders them unable to effectively work and generally participate in the public sphere. The value of obedience to rulers (the royal family) and superiors (i.e. men) that is so central to Wahhabi teachings only further isolates women. Unfortunately, Al-Rasheed (2013) laments how local religious scholars or the Salafi-Wahhabi ulama within SA have stretched their readings of the original religious texts far beyond their original remit in order to further isolate women, and other minorities for that matter, in society. Tight control over civil society further diminishes the ability of women to campaign for any form of social transformation. Religious leaders, in cahoots, with the monarchy, have effectively marked out obedience to rulers as a behavior that is regulated by divinity. Dissent has been outlawed on similar grounds, as a function of God's will.

The country's Shia minority is similarly oppressed, albeit it is the only group that (infrequently and with little success) forms real, in-person protests, the vast majority of other dissenters being pushed online, a result of the regime's successful fragmentation of any potential opposition. SA's unique relationship with Islam has birthed a form of religious nationalism, grounded in Wahhabism, that restricts religious diversity. As such, those who do not conform to the ideal type portrayed in Wahhabi scriptures, such as the Shia, are systematically excluded from society (Mustafa and Troudi, 2019). In a classic mark of autocracy, the Saudi leadership has skillfully polarised society along geographical, religious, gendered, ideological, and political lines such that no meaningful opposition may form. These dividing lines in Saudi society have become deeply entrenched and have become a brutally effective tool for safeguarding the regime by rendering the formation of a broad-based opposition demanding reform almost impossible. The regime has also played on emotive primordial fractures to bring about such a situation. Individuals and groups who do cross such lines are brutally persecuted, branded as traitors and adversaries. As such the Saudi populace remains largely passive and subservient.

5.5 Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates

Abu Dhabi is the capital and second-largest city (Dubai being first) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven emirates, each governed by its own (male) Emir. The House of Nahyan, who control the fifth largest sovereign wealth fund in the world, are the ruling family of Abu Dhabi. Indeed, when MCFC was founded back in 1880, the Al Nahyan family was already ruling over Abu Dhabi, albeit in a very different, pre-oil context to the one we see now (Vanderwalle, 2009). Once a regional center of the pearl trade, British strategic and trade interests in the Gulf beginning in the 19th century intensified as the prospects for oil discovery grew in the 1930s. In 1958 oil was struck for the first time and in the subsequent decades, massive oil and gas reserves would be discovered (Morton, 2011). On the back of this abundance of natural resource-based wealth, the UAE, and in particular, Abu Dhabi, would undergo massive and rapid development and urbanisation. Thus in a very short time span, the emirate has transformed from a small town with a population of around 6,000 at the beginning of the 20th century, to a thriving metropolis that is a major center for politics, culture, and commerce. This transformation has of course been founded on the back of rich on and offshore oil reserves which amount to one-tenth of the world's total stock, with Bagaeen's (2007) notion of "Dubaiification", also applying to Abu Dhabi. And while Dubai may be considered the more glamorous of the two, there is no doubt that the real seat of power in the UAE rests in Abu Dhabi.

The UAE is considered a rising, middle, and regional power (Gibbins, 2017). Traditionally seen as an insular and stand-offish state, the UAE has in recent times become much more militarily active, making a name for itself as a significant player in the Middle East, where it has played a key role in Syria, Yemen, and the anti-ISIS counter-terrorism campaigns. This development is unsurprising when one considers the trend towards militarisation and other such hard power resources in the region in recent decades, however, the UAE is also noted for its significant soft power capabilities. The UAE is the highest-ranked Middle Eastern country in the Global Soft Power Index (Brand Finance, 2020). And the emirates do not shy away from their overt use of soft power as a strategic tool. In 2017, the UAE's Soft Power Council published the latest iteration of its Soft Power Strategy, with the stated aims of developing non-oil and gas-based sectors, promoting the UAE's position as the primary entry point into the Middle East, establishing the UAE (and in particular Abu Dhabi and Dubai) as a regional capital for tourism, art, and culture, and finally, building the UAE's reputation as a modern, tolerant, and welcoming country. Presently though Abu Dhabi's economy is still heavily dependent on crude oil production (Antwi-Boateng and Alhashmi, 2022).

5.6 What Crimes Does the UAE Stand Accused Of?

The UAE stands accused of many of the same crimes as its regional ally, Saudi Arabia. Serious human rights violations including injudicious imprisonment, maltreatment of such prisoners, the abolition to express oneself freely, and the suppression of the right to privacy are just some of the accusations leveled against the UAE in a recent Amnesty (2021) report. The UAE also played a pivotal role in the blockade of Qatar, while also participating in, and offering support to Saudi Arabia, in relation to the disastrous and heinous war in Yemen.

Similar to Saudi Arabia, the UAE is an authoritarian monarchy, where citizens cannot form a political opposition, or provide a critique of the ruling regime. Those who do, such as prominent academics and activists risk harassment, imprisonment, and torture (Marczak and Scott-Railton, 2016).

Abduction of both Emiratis and foreign nationals is commonplace (Carpanelli, 2021), while women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and migrants, are denied basic rights and shunned from

society. Furthermore, rampant media censorship and press suppression are reflected in the UAE's routine ranking near the bottom of international measures for human rights and freedom of the press. The Emirates have also opted out of most of the international covenants relating to the protection of human rights.

6. How Did It Come To This?

Before answering the overarching question of why autocrats have taken a keen interest in sports, and more specifically, in British football, and discerning what the impact of this so-called "sportswashing" is, if anything, it is important to first look at the pre-conditions and particular contextual factors that have made such developments possible today. A quick glance over key events stretching from the formation of the professional game in the United Kingdom in the mid-19th century, right through to the creation of the English Premier League in 1992, it becomes more and more clear how football has become so politicised, which in turn, has led to its penetration by nefarious characters such as Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Muhammad Bin Salman, or controversial Russian oligarch, Roman Abramovich.

1. Institutional Structures

The Football Association (FA) of England was founded in 1863. The subsequent FA Cups, beginning in 1871, potential to generate income from ticket sales enhanced competition to the point that players had to be offered financial compensation in return for playing (Harvey, 2013). In 1885 football becomes professional and in 1888 the Football League is founded, leading to increased commercialization. Here we can observe the genesis of the current turbo-capitalistic football ecosystem.

Clubs were initially ran by committees under English common law whereby committee members had unlimited liability for financial transactions undertaken by the football club (Buraimo et al, 2006) on superior playing talent, the financial burden and risk became too great for committee members, who were often drawn from the local community and did not possess vast sums of wealth. Internal ownership structures had to change in order for clubs to keep up with what was becoming an insatiable appetite for the consumption of football by the British public, and of course, such that a select few could cash in on this new craze.

In 1892, the FA allows Preston North End (PNE) to remodel itself from a membership club structure, to a limited company (Lewis, 1997). Regarded as England's first great footballing dynasty, PNE had for years been illegally bringing the best Scottish players down south, and applied for the structure change out of necessity; the club needed money to pay for and maintain the best players, while also wishing to protect its member's personal liabilities as the cost of doing business had begun to greatly increase. The FA ruled that while clubs could restructure themselves as private companies, they must also curb dividends to shareholders. This move equated to the acceptance by authorities that clubs were now essentially full-fledged businesses, although FA directives, such as Rule 34, whereby clubs should be run as not-for-profit organisations, attempted to maintain the facade of a membership culture (Sanchez et al, 2020).

By 1923, all 88 clubs in the Football League operate under a joint-stock structure, meaning that shareholders with limited liability now own and operate clubs much like a regular business from which profits can be drawn. This legal structure remains in place in most clubs to this day and to this day English football has been plagued by financial instability (Buraimo et al., 2010). This opening up of the football club market was further augmented by the advent of sponsorship income and TV deals beginning in the 1980s, at a time when English football was plagued by issues concerning hooliganism, deteriorating infrastructure (highlighted by the Hillsborough disaster and the subsequent Taylor Report), and a universally lousy reputation. Taylor (1987) even highlights how the Times infamously described the game as a slum sport for slum people, played in slum surroundings. However, it is not until the early 1990s that genuine corporatism really kicks in and becomes embedded into the English game.

2. The Commercialisation of English Football

In 1983, Tottenham Hotspurs become the first football club to be floated on the stock market as part of an IPO. They were followed by Manchester United in 1991, the clubs majority shareholder, Martin Edwards, immediately seeing his original investment of £600,000 increase by 1000%. Over the next two decade many clubs will follow Tottenham's lead to mixed results with the period being marked by a flurry of listings and de-listings on English stock exchanges (Leach and Szymanski, 2015). A growing appetite for capital, coupled with an inept FA constitution that was failing to properly govern the game meant that disgruntled top clubs unsatisfied with their share of the footballing pie, decide to break away from the Football League in 1992/3 (Sound familiar to followers of the much-maligned European Super League?). They form the Premier League and there is a further explosion of income and an even greater widening of the income distribution between major and smaller clubs.

In 1997, the seed is sown for foreign ownership of English football clubs when Egyptian businessman, Mohamed Al-Fayed purchased London side, Fulham. Soon after Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich takes over Chelsea. By 2016, three in five of all Premier League teams are owned by foreign investors, mostly from the Middle East, the US, and Southeast Asia (Rodhe and Breuer, 2016).

Profitability in English football has been meager since the 1980s, with the majority of clubs sustaining losses most years (Lago et al., 2010). Excessive wage expenditures, inflated transfer values and the growth of European football have all combined to further threaten the financial stability of clubs outside of the select few elites. With the gap between said elite and the rest growing wider and wider, the institutional structures of club football, as well as the hyper-commerciality that has come to drive the sport in England, must be reconsidered.

Although the commercialisation of football has become especially salient in recent times, the stage for such developments were in fact set almost three decades ago, with the formation of the bankable product that is the Premier League. And while football's latest golden goose, the reviled European Super League fell short in the spring of 2021, few have realised that the precedence for such a money-grab was in fact set in England, in 1992, in an equivalent move by the nation's elite clubs.

In 1965, when football matches began to be televised, the BBC paid around £5000 for the rights to show the highlights of games, which was to be shared equally among every club across the four divisions. Unsatisfied with their cut, bigger clubs begin to apply pressure on the league to reshuffle

television income allocation, such that by 1988, the top division now keeps half of the £44 million deal with ITV, with a quarter going to the second division, and the remaining quarter being shared equally between the third and fourth divisions (Bishop et al., 2021). As mentioned before, at a time when the game was in disrepute, the elite clubs quietly decide to break away from the Football League. In need of money to finance such a move, a deal is signed with Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB corporation (Sky Sports) and in a matter of weeks, football goes from being free to view, to requiring a costly monthly subscription. Murdoch's army of marketers, consultants, and publicists concoct a cacophony of pyrotechnics and scantily-clad women to win over new subscribers as football goes from being a mere sport, to a form of complete entertainment. In an interview with Hammer (2021), a Sky Sports marketing executive, John Smith, unequivocally ruled that the Premier League was completely geared towards financial gain.



Figure 9: A promotional event for the newly-launched English Premier League (Boylan, 1992)

In the shadow of this unparalleled monetisation of football, the disastrous side-effects of financial greed are beginning to take root, as the wheels of power in the game begin to turn and change. However, under the banner of “A Whole New Ball Game”, and riding the wave of excitement that accompanied the arrival of foreign superstars such as Jurgen Klinsmann, Juninho, and Dennis Bergkamp, a new era is hailed in, one which is supposed to be a far-cry from the dark days of the 1980s (Milward, 2017). In other words, Duke's (2002) McDonaldization / Disneyisation of football has begun.

Due to the BSkyB TV deal, Premier League clubs, have become almost overnight, an extremely lucrative business proposition and it is within this context that sufficient space has been created for foreign oligarchs and autocrats to penetrate the nucleus of English football. With such huge flows of capital involved it should perhaps be unsurprising that “dirty” or “blood” money from questionable sources has become diffuse within the game. And such levels of finance beget influence with the English Premier League considered one of the most positive representations of the UK across the globe, with the British government regularly utilising the EPL brand abroad on trade missions and as a key component of its statecraft and soft power strategy (Populus, 2018).

3. *The Taylor Report*

Few could have predicted such a meteoric rise for the profile of the game, especially when compared with the malaise experienced by the sport in the 1980s, a decade characterised by a series of tragedies. Within the space of three weeks in 1985, 95 football fans perished in two separate stadia-related incidents in Bradford and Brussels (where 600 were also badly injured). At the end of the decade, 96 Liverpool fans were killed in a crowd crush at the Hillsborough disaster, in what would prove a tipping point for the game (Turner, 2021; Hughson and Spaaij, 2011)). In the wake of these calamities, attendances at games plummeted to the lowest levels since the 1920s. With the game in a state of disgrace and shame, in 1989 an official government report known as the Taylor Report is commissioned by the Lord Justice Peter Taylor.

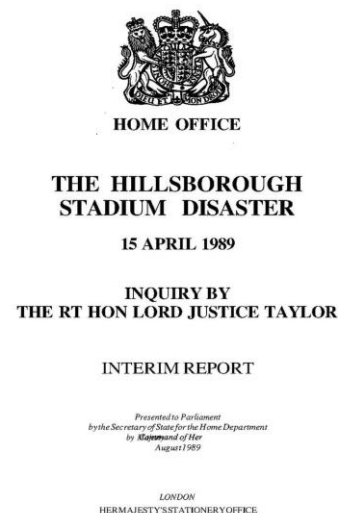


Figure 10 and 11: *Scenes from the Hillsborough Disaster (left); the Taylor Report (right) (Sellers, 1989; Taylor, 1988).*

The report is a damning indictment of the game, revealing a deeply divided sport characterised by young working-class fans bundled into cages like animals and sometimes dying in these sub-par stadia terraces while upper-class directors watch on from their executive boxes (Bale, 2000). Taylor rules that stadia are too old, facilities are inadequate, hooliganism is out of control, with shocking alcohol and drug abuses taking place in an environment where no one is showing any semblance of leadership or professionalism. Interestingly, Taylor also concludes that irrespective of all these deficiencies, the game still commands an extraordinary amount of public support and interest (Conn, 2012) in what is a recognition of the tremendous power of sport. In light of the report, clubs are called on to modernise their stadiums and to replace the standing terraces with seats.

On the back of the Taylor Report, fans begin to be treated more like paying customers. It therefore played an intrinsic role in football's transformation into its current form of total entertainment, awash with overpriced tickets and flashy marketing. The Taylor Report could be looked at as English

football's first instance of self-reflection and soul-searching, a process it would greatly benefit from today. Such was the magnitude of the report that Penney and Redhead (2009) refer to the period followings its publication as the post-Taylor Report era, arguing that it helped to usher in the beginnings of the contemporary football landscape we see today.

4. Promotion/Relegation

The promotion/relegation system that is in place has further exacerbated the situation as clubs take unnecessary financial risks to avoid relegation or to gain promotion. The paradigmatic case of this is Leeds United, who having reached the semi-final of the Champions League in 2001, would go on to file for bankruptcy just two years later. The club's chairman, Peter Ridsdale, would go on to admit that the club had borrowed far far beyond its mean in order to stay competitive and keep up with the elite clubs (Rostron, 2012). And while the Leeds case may be the most extreme, it is not uncommon, nor surprising the lengths clubs will go to to avoid relegation or achieve promotion given the financial disparities that exist between the two: In the 2009/2010 season the bottom-placed Premier League team earned £40 million, while the average club in the Championship earns a measly £2 million (Plumley et al., 2018).

Compared to a closed system, such as that which can be found in the National Football League (NFL) in the US, the implications for financial stability and fairness are truly manifold. In the NFL, income from commercial sources, as well as from broadcasting, is all centrally controlled and redistributed equally among all teams in the league. Together with a tightly controlled player market, where all athletes are subject to the same salary ceiling, the result is a far more competitive league environment where all club owners stand a greater chance of turning a profit within a financially stable league setting (Hamil and Walters, 2013). In any one year in the NFL there is a significant number of teams who have a realistic chance of winning the competition's top prize, the Superbowl, while the formation of footballing dynasties, where one team dominates the league, is extremely rare in the NFL.

The same cannot be said for the English Premier League, where barring a miracle (which we did see in 2016 when Leicester City won the league) one of the "Big 4" is almost guaranteed to lift the trophy at the end of the season (Manchester City have just won their fourth Premier League title in five years). Similarly, the higher-ups in English football and the majority of club owners seem unable to grasp the simple concept that is a cornerstone of sports economics, that to ensure profitability across the board, teams must forego some element of control over their business models owing to the fact that a sporting competition like the Premier League is a joint product that requires robust competition in order for the league to be a success. If teams are to consistently turn a profit, the incentive to participate in labour cost competition for playing talent, brought on by the concept of promotion and relegation (amongst other things), must be removed or at least minimised (Noll, 2002).

5. The Transfer Market and the Bosman Ruling

The source of competitive advantage in football is not the finest stadiums, training facilities, and youth academies, but rather, the best players, and the best players cost a lot of money. Recent years

have seen transfer fees balloon to a level that is almost beyond belief with Neymar Jr., a Brazilian forward, setting the world record for a transfer fee in 2017 when he moved from Barcelona to Paris Saint-Germain for 220,000,000 Euro (transfermrkt.com). Indeed, the European transfer market is by far the largest in the world, with the best leagues and most talented players from all over the planet gravitating towards the European continent.

The transfer market for playing talent is the classic capitalistic, free, and unshackled exchange where human capital is bought and sold in what Hamil and Walters (2013) have succinctly described as the labor market version of a Cold War arms race. Ever since the Bosman ruling in 1995 the single market for human capital in football has expanded exponentially, with the European Court of Justice's verdict in this case delivering two massively important rulings: freedom of movement and freedom of contract for players (Antonioni and Cubbin, 2000). These crucial developments would be the first step in what would become a destructive inflationary spiral in both transfer fees, player wages, and agent commissions, as well as a steep decline in competitive equality (Knight, 2013).



Figure 12 and 13: *Jean-Marc Bosman and the world's most expensive footballer, Neymar Jr. (Panini Group, 1988; Merlin Heritage; 2021).*

The positive statistical correlation between success and expenditure in football is by now, well documented (Deloitte, 2021). Money buys trophies, the cases in point being Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain, who on the back of resource-based wealth from the Gulf States, have both gone on to dominate their respective domestic leagues for the past decade.

To cite the NFL as an example again, where each year a draft system is in place whereby the team to finish bottom of the standings receives the first draft pick, i.e., they get the first option on the best player to come out of the highly developed university system that year. Similarly the utilisation of a luxury tax, as well as a salary ceiling as seen in the NBA, would also be of great benefit to football. A league wage budget administered and regulated by the FA would bring about a level playing field and some semblance of competitive parity which has been absent from the game for some time now. A

luxury taxes will redistribute fines from teams who pass the salary cap amongst the league's other teams.

There is a clear and obvious danger that the game of football may become uncompetitive and boring, if it has not already done so. German champions, Bayern Munich, have just won their tenth domestic league championship in a row, despite the German league, the Bundesliga, being described as one of the most equitable and ethical in the world. Similarly, Manchester City have just won their fourth English Premier League title in five years. In a quantitative analysis using concentration ratios in the EPL, Behan (2021) has statistically proven how the league has lost its competitive balance, with its winner inescapably being drawn from the traditional "Big 6" (Leicester being the glaring outlier). Every single one of these teams is owned by a billionaire, two of whom are oligarchs. This trend is consistent across all of Europe's "Big 5" leagues (Spain, Italy, France), with the exception of the German Bundesliga, where despite football's position as a public cultural good which must be protected, the league still remains deeply flawed.

6. *(Pan-)European Football and UEFA*

The football oligopoly forming at the tip of the European football pyramid is pulling away at breakneck speed from the rest of the competition. The top few teams from the Big Five leagues (England, Spain, Germany, France, Italy) are gradually forming their own super league in all but name, even when an overt attempt to officially create a European Super League in 2021 ended in a spectacular and embarrassing failure. The ideals of fairness and openness which have been at the heart of European football since the founding of the ECCF in 1955 have all but disappeared. In their place an insatiable appetite for money-fuelled success, no matter what the (non-financial) cost. The elite clubs are tightening their grip on all available trophies and revenue streams, and in doing so they are literally squeezing the life out of an already dangerously fragmented European pool of teams. In fact, the top of the football hierarchy has remained unchanged now for almost four decades, barring two exceptions: Manchester City and Paris Saint-Germain. Both of these clubs have the backing of the UAE and Qatar respectively, and as such have spent their way to the top on the back of limitless financial wealth, in what Preuss et al, (2014) call the "sugar daddy effect". Without such financial doping it is virtually impossible to cross the chasm between the elites and the rest, although Newcastle fans will be hoping that their new Saudi owners will also be able to artificially help their club climb to the top of the footballing food chain.

The UEFA Champions League (UCL) is the most prestigious club competition in the world and as such, there is a tremendous amount of riches to be gained for those who firstly even qualify, and then for those who progress until its later stages. At the higher end, club's entire business models are based off progression deep into the UCL and in the past we have seen clubs who have failed to do so take years to regain their positions due to the loss of revenue from a single season out of the competition. On the other hand, participation and progression through European competitions have been shown to increase club revenues from ticket sales and broadcasting incomes, thus increasing the club's profile and enabling it to acquire superior talent (Deloitte, 2013). However, scholars such as Plumley and Flint (2015) have questioned the ranking and seeding system that underpins the UCL with a statistical analysis that highlighted a skewed competitive balance in the group stages that favors elite clubs, thereby calling the integrity of the competition into question. In the same paper, it was also shown that lucrative prize money has also been consistently distributed in an inequitable manner that also favors

the elite teams (Plumley and Flint, 2015). Indeed this elite groups of clubs could even be described as a football cartel.

Pawlowski et al. (2010) have argued that such is the importance attached to European competitions nowadays, that domestic leagues are suffering from a loss of competitive balance. As the same core teams usually qualify year on year, they are able to build up significant budgetary gaps between themselves and their rivals, thus creating stark asymmetric market power between teams that renders their domestic competitions uncompetitive (Vrooman, 2015). This decreased emphasis on domestic-level football has led to what Szymanski and Kuper (2015) refer to as the denationalisation of European football, which has, in turn, expanded the potential fan base for clubs to an almost unlimited level with this of course translating into additional revenue streams. All things considered, the inflated importance of pan-European football has essentially led to a process that could be viewed as the colonisation of non-elite teams and leagues by the aforementioned football oligopoly. Owing to this wealth gap, football is becoming more and more uncompetitive, while the exercising of restorative measures such as FFP seem to have had the perverse effect of actually strengthening the iron grip the top teams have on European football. These developments also reflect a severe deficiency in regulation and governance across the game.

Although these six factors do not paint the full picture, I do propose that they are six of the most important factors that have severely constricted the inner mechanics of English football, and in doing so have afforded dubious characters from the Gulf the opportunity to seamlessly infiltrate the upper echelons of one of England's most prized cultural institutions. These factors have in turn created a sort of ownership vacuum that oligarchs and autocrats are more than happy to fill. The others at the top table will not, or do not seem to care. For them (the FA, the UK government, UEFA, and other such monied political elites) this is a simple exercise of status quo maintenance, whereby the rich are getting even richer. Indeed this cadre of well-connected individuals and organizations are coming to resemble a crooked patronage network that one would sooner expect to find in an authoritarian regime such as SA or Russia. So besotted with money have they become, that they themselves are blind to the fact that by allowing nefarious characters such as MBS into the football industry, they are harming some of the formative fabric upon which British culture is steeped in, while also subverting the commitment of millions of football fans up and down the country.

7. The MBS-Shaped Elephant in the Room

A critical juncture in this story is the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) as crown prince in June 2017, in a move which effectively sees him become the de facto ruler of SA, with his father King Salman still officially remaining its de jure leader. MBS, born August 1, 1985, also serves as SA's minister of defence. Having showed a keen interest in governance and politics from a young age, Mohammed would rarely be seen far from his father's side as he was effectively being groomed for a position of power within the Saudi royal family. Reported to be the future King's favorite son, he would spend his whole life in the Kingdom (unlike his brothers and cousins who often go abroad for education), obtaining a law degree before becoming a formal advisor to his father, the then governor of Riyadh, in 2009 (Ulrichsen, 2017). Upon the death of King Abdullah in 2015, Mohammed's father would ascend to the throne, immediately promoting MBS to be his defence minister. Eager to prove himself, Mohammed launched Operation Decisive Storm, a large-scale military intervention in Yemen, which was planned to turn the tide of the civil war there in favor of

the pro-Saudi President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in his fight against the Iran-backed Shia Houthi rebels (Brehony, 2020). The results of this failed operation are still being felt across the region.

Mohammed was also given control of Aramco, the state-owned oil company (one of the world's largest by revenue), as well as the Council of Economic and Developmental Affairs, which dictates the Kingdom's policy for economic development. Emboldened by his new positions of power MBS set out his new development program, Vision 2030, while also seeking to complete an initial public offering of Aramco in what would be the world's largest IPO (Woertz, 2019). MBS' ambition has again proven to be misplaced, with neither venture proving a success. In 2017, upon his appointment as crown prince, Mohammed would lead a blockade against Qatar for its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran (Selmi and Bouoiyour, 2020). Shortly after, MBS would conduct a purge involving some of SA's most powerful individuals including business leaders, senior officials, and members of the royal family. Publicised as an anti-corruption measure, it was not difficult to see this was a blatant power grab by MBS, who forced individuals to relinquish assets and pay fines amounting to billions of dollars.



Figure 14: MBS on the cover of *TIME* magazine, a reflection of how he has captured the popular imagination in the West (Schoeller, 2018).

For a time, MBS was able to effectively manage his image abroad, especially in the West, where he was often hailed as a reformer and a moderniser. Mohammed became adept at making small yet symbolic relaxations pertaining to the strict social conditions imposed on Saudi citizens, especially women. Indeed even in the period preceding MBS domination of the state, the Saudi leadership has given the impression of liberalisation by allowing some quasi-independent civil society groups to form, a highly controlled “free” press, the running of staged municipal elections, and other such cosmetic reforms (Al-Rasheed, 2009). In line with Vision 2030 and in an effort to boost tourism as a

means of diversifying the Saudi economy away from oil, women were given permission to drive, attend sporting events, and cinemas. The straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak, was the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi, for which MBS has been held personally responsible. The fallout from this shocking event saw public opinion finally turn against Mohammed, as his megalomaniac tendencies have finally overridden his hollow rhetoric.

Under the incendiary and bullish MBS, Saudi foreign policy has undergone a striking transformation with significant permutations for geopolitics in the Middle East and beyond, as Saudi policy has shifted from cautious and secretive diplomacy to a more aggressive dogma. Initially hailed as a reformer, bin Salman has proven himself a consistent risk-taker, who handsomely rewards those who fall into line, and brutally punishes those who do not (just ask his cousins and uncles) (Gause, 2018). Devoid of traditional statesmanship and firefighting skills, MBS has pinned his hopes on his own inflated abilities, muscular US support, and very very deep pockets. Will this be enough to tame the troubled Middle East? The ongoing war in Yemen, as well as the multiple proxy wars being fought with Iran, point to a leader who is better at lighting, rather than putting out fires.

A strong relationship with the US, on the back of huge lobbying in Washington, massive investment in PR, and the dangling of the carrot that is investment in the American economy, seems to be one of the primary goals of this new foreign policy agenda (Aghamohammadi and Omid, 2018). Similarly, tenuous alliances have been formed with countries such as the UAE and Egypt in an effort to shut off its archnemesis, Iran, as SA seeks to achieve regional parity with the likes of Israel, Iran, and Turkey (Ragab, 2017). Simultaneously there has been a deteriorating rapport with Europe owing to MBS's irredentist regional goals. With the US continuing to act as its patron, it seems MBS sees little utility in allocating resources or attention towards the Europeans, instead pinning his hopes on the fact that American support, coupled with Saudi's extensive resource-based wealth and rising military capabilities, will suffice to continue his erratic venture for regional hegemony. In the not too distant future, MBS will ascend to the throne in the place of his father, and all things point towards an even more forceful shift toward future upheaval as SA successfully plays the part of the provocateur by, for example, moving closer to the Israelis. Nothing is off the table when MBS is the kingmaker.

8. The Geopolitics of the Middle-East

The Middle East is one of the most important regions in the world. Above all, its massive energy reserves make it a critical actor in global affairs, where it is seen as a crucial partner/enabler to many of the world's great powers, and thus, its great power politics. 79.4% of the world's oil stocks and 44% of its gas are located in the Middle East (OPEC, 2019). Such is the Middle East's importance in the global energy supply chain that ever since oil was first discovered there by British geologist George Bernard Reynolds in what was then Persia (present-day Iran), the region has seen considerable outside interference from the likes of the British, the Americans, and the Russians, to name but a few (Sorkhabi, 2010).

In light of these oil-related developments, the Middle East has become known as an extremely volatile region, with a precariously fragile security ecosystem that is further complicated by the aforementioned near-constant interventions from primarily "Western" powers looking to safeguard their own interests in the region. For decades, the geopolitics of the wider region was dominated by the Israel-Palestine/Arab conflict, but new issues beginning in the 1970s such as the Iranian nuclear program, disturbances in the region's many sheikhdoms, and the rivalry between Iran and Saudi

Arabia (Shia vs Sunni), which has affected almost every state and group in the region, has seen the area become particularly “hot” (Bojarczyk, 2012).

The Middle East, therefore, presents a unique geopolitical situation, where most developments are currently underpinned by the Iranian-Saudi Arabian rivalry, under the umbrella of which, most rivalry and cooperation takes place. Such is the dominant role of these two states in shaping not just the security-related, but also political and economic issues in the region, that virtually all other states in the region (bar Iraq and Israel) can be neatly placed in either the Shia, Persia Iranian camp, or the Arab Sunni Saudi one, to whom the smaller states, such as the UAE, look to for guidance and protection (Hashemi and Postel, 2017).

Another consequential geopolitical feature of many Middle Eastern societies is their population structures. Almost all states are struggling with rapidly rising populations, of which a significant population are considered young (under 30s). Governments are struggling to integrate this growing segment of society into the labor force, with many Middle Eastern nationals unwilling to take low-income jobs, resulting in a massively unproductive workforce that is completely dependent on migrant workers to fill this labour-gap (around 75% of the population in Qatar and Kuwait are foreign expatriates) (Bojarczyk, 2012). This presents major socio-economic issues, as foreign labourers alter the social and cultural fabric of Middle-Eastern societies, resulting in destabilising tremors throughout the region. Thus far, the sheikhdoms have been able to paper over the cracks with oil revenues, however, the need for reform and the implementation of new social, economic, and political programs is clear to see. The addiction to oil only further highlights the undeveloped nature of the other sectors of most Middle Eastern economies.

The next geopolitical factor that is characteristic of the region is militarisation, with the Middle East counting as one of the most militarised areas on the planet. Countless conflicts have defined the region over the last number of decades (Iraq-Iran war 1980, Operation Desert Storm 1991, the containment of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and the subsequent stabilisation effort throughout the 1990s and 2000s, to name but a few), as well as hard power rivalry between the region’s bigger players (Iran, Saudi, and to a lesser extent Iraq and Israel), resulting in a perilous military power balance (Cordesman, 2019). American meddling in the region has also had a profound impact, with the US attempting to create an anti-Iranian, pro-American security system that suits its geopolitical needs. The US occupies the paradoxical position of acting as one of the region’s primary mediators, while also supplying the area with the bulk of its arms.

Finally, if we shift our focus to the leadership of the subjects of this investigation, MBS of Saudi Arabia, and Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) of the UAE, we can gain a great insight into why these countries behave as they do. The two rulers, described as the most powerful in the Arab world (Kirkpatrick, 2019), share a close relationship, despite MBZ being a quarter of a century older than MBS. Indeed, MBS has described MBZ as a great mentor, with both sharing similar opinions on how to handle matters in the Gulf and further afield, including matters pertaining to the Yemeni conflict and the Qatar blockade. Both are considered extremely ambitious, although the calmer and more reserved MBZ is regarded as the real mastermind, with MBS taking note from his senior. In fact, Law (2020) described MBZ as being at the forefront of most disputes in the Arab world, while he is also happy to remain in the shadows as the more bashful MBS enjoys the limelight, a trait MBZ feels he can take advantage of. Regional events such as the Arab Spring have brought the leaders even closer together, as they present a united front on Political Islam, while MBS views the UAE as a model of success for SA to follow in the future (Romero, 2022). This unique relationship, grounded in shared

interests and realities, will create opportunities for geopolitical cooperation and competition in the future, and as such, will have a significant bearing on the behaviour of both states.

It is against such a geopolitical background that the two subjects of this investigation (Saudi Arabia and the UAE) can be placed, and their actions with regard to sportswashing can thus be contextualised, understood, and explained. Indeed many will be keeping a close eye on how MBS' newly-minted Newcastle will stack up against MBZ's English champions Manchester City next season.

9. Discussion

9.1 Definitional Issues

To recall the earlier definition of “sportswashing” provided by Amnesty International (2018); the practice of a state, individual, or company, using sport to improve its reputation, particularly with regard to human rights abuses. As a starting point, this was an acceptable definition put forward by Amnesty, at a time when the phenomenon of sportswashing was still in its infancy, and very few understood what it implied or what impact it would have. However, in the few short years since the term's coining, sportswashing has fully penetrated the popular imagination, becoming a staple of the English lexicon, and in doing it warrants a new, more complete interpretation that takes into consideration the intricate dynamics that predicate this empirical phenomenon. Other common definitions include words such as “controversial country” (relating to the sportswasher) (Collins, 2021), corrupt, tyrannical, autocratic regime (again, relating to the sportswasher) (Macmillan, 2018). Almost all prevalent definitions pigeonhole sportswashing with human rights abuses, when in reality, it can be used to airbrush all sorts of crimes, not just human-rights-related ones.

This is why I suggest a new, more refined definition, with the benefit of hindsight over my esteemed colleagues at Amnesty, over whom I have the advantage of witnessing several significant developments in the field of sportswashing since 2018. Indeed, I find the 2018 definition to be to reductive and simplistic, which has seen what I believe to be its over-use, especially by Western states in their accusations against Asian, African, and Middle Eastern nations. Sportswashing indicates a moralistic viewpoint on how actors should not conventionalise the actions of non-democratic regimes, pertaining to their involvement with, and utilisation of, sport. Similarly, sportswashing can be looked at as a label for “bad” countries that do not reflect “our”(“Western”) values. Sportswashing, as we know it, is thus, a deeply flawed, misunderstood, and under-explained conception.

The lines between sportswashing, soft power, nation branding, and sports diplomacy are all very blurred and fuzzy. In particular, the conflation of sportswashing and soft power is common, and understandable. Sportswashing is perceived as an inherently negative endeavor, shrouded in chicanery and skullduggery, while soft power is portrayed in a more positive light, often seen as an appropriate and sensible political tool. What can explain this conundrum? Perhaps the answer lies in culture, and more specifically, on the idea of a myopic, Western-biased cultural lens.

Sportswashing is more of a dynamic, ongoing multi-layered process, than a singular,static one-off event. Soft power enhancement is the end result of a successful sportswashing strategy, of which nation branding, sports diplomacy, the hosting of SMEs, and in this case, the purchasing of football clubs are all constituent parts. Going forward I suggest a more cautious use of the term and to whom it may apply. I, therefore, propose the following definition for sportswashing in the 21st century:

“...the deceitful use of sports by nation-states, organisations, and/or individuals to reconstruct and redirect prevailing negative narratives and discourse of which they are the subject, as part of a wider, multi-faceted, and dynamic process which may include a combination of hosting sports events, purchasing sports teams, using sport for diplomatic means, and/or branding of the nation...”

This definition contends for the fact that the actor undertaking the sportswashing need not be an oppressive regime, like Saudi Arabia or the UAE. It also accounts for the fact that sportswashers do not only originate from non-democracies. As discussed, we have already seen examples of both the United States and the United Kingdom participating in large-scale sportswashing campaigns. This definition also widens the scope of sportswashing beyond human rights abuses. Finally, by accounting for concepts such as discourse and narrative, this interpretation of sportswashing is able to account for the often, subconscious, marginal way in which sportswashing interacts with society. Sportswashing may thus be looked at as a frame of reference, representing the reality of sport, where such portrayals are filtered through discourses that connect sportswashing with topics as varied as human rights, soft power, and corruption. Sportswashing embodies these socio-economic and political narratives, thereby offering us a valuable means of understanding the convoluted and contested truths that drive our world. As sport is liminal (Edelman and Young, 2019), it embodies and communicates its essence not only through institutions like FIFA or the EPL, and mass media, but in the interstices between them, in homes, boroughs, yards, fields, bars, restaurants, and the underworld, where autocrats and politicians interact.

9.2 Sportswashing: The Beginning of the End?

The expulsion of Russian influence from football following its barbarous invasion of Ukraine appears to be one of the first-ever public and large-scale pushbacks against sportswashing. In the midst of these horrific events, we have seen the now-former Chelsea owner, the oligarch, Roman Abramovich, who has close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin, ostracized from the Premier League after almost two decades, many billions spent, and many trophies won, at the West London club (Ingle, 2022). Along the same lines, both FIFA and UEFA have suspended all Russian national and club teams from all of their football competitions. This swift cutting of ties has emphasised the uncomfortable relationship between politics and sport, highlighting the severe lack of morality and ethics that has penetrated football in recent years, as it has consistently sold its soul in exchange for dirty money from questionable sources. But do these sanctions represent a paradigm shift in perceptions towards sportswashing? And if so why did it take an act as vicious as an illegal invasion, with war crimes to boot, to trigger such action after an interminable inaction?

Does Abramovich's forcing out spell dark clouds for Newcastle and Manchester City's owners? Rising political scrutiny owing to the oligarch's Kremlin ties have shone a glaring light on the source of funding for various ventures, with sport, and in particular football, being such a high-profile and discernible industry, it has come under particularly heavy scrutiny as a medium for investment. Stricter tests for potential future owners have been mooted, however, these would not effect those who already have their foot in the door. Despite the criticisms of the Saudi and UAE regimes, the UK continues to cultivate an ever-closer relationship with both, making any potential future arbitration more complicated. In fact, the British government has actively encouraged investment from the Middle East for a long time now, it being no secret that the Saudis and Emiratis like to spend significant sums of money, thus representing an extremely lucrative revenue stream for the UK

(Chadwick, 2022). Trade shocks arising from Brexit have further highlighted the importance of this relationship.

So are we witnessing a surge in sport-related investment sportswashing, or is it simply motivated by financial and/or soft power considerations? Clearly, the development strategies of SA and the UAE are grounded in the creation of income through foreign investments. Sport is an important part of this strategy, and by positioning oneself as an influential contributor to the worldwide sporting industry, one can begin to wean the state from its oil addiction. Some (mostly in the “West”) would call this insidious sportswashing, others (mostly in the Gulf) would say it is simply a lesson in the projection of soft power. What’s the difference? Is sportswashing simply a lens through which the “West” views what is happening in other states?, casting SA and the UAE as manipulating sports for contrary, mercenarial, and pernicious reasons. I do not yet have the answers to these questions, while debates about the intentionality behind sportswashing are extremely difficult to verify. However, this conundrum does underscore some of the complex and subtle nuances behind sportswashing, revealing that it is not as black and white as the media sometimes portrays it; the sportswashing case of NUFC and Saudi Arabi cannot be deducted to the simple binary of Newcastle and football are good, while Saudi Arabia is bad. The reality is not that simple, and any future reporting, writing, or analysis of sportswashing should reflect this fact.

9.3 The Future

As much as we love the cultural and entertainment phenomenon that is football, it is ultimately a business and in business, money talks. In an ideal world, money would not speak louder than morals, but in our capitalist society, it unfortunately does. Sportswashing, in some shape or form, is everywhere, and it is here to stay. Perhaps it could be said that we are in the midst of THE sportswashing epoch.

Critics of the validity of sportswashing may say that it is in fact ubiquitous and therefore not only the premise of non-democratic states. They may point to the duplicity of organising bodies like FIFA and the IOC, who, shrouded in charges of endemic corruption, have awarded several consecutive showpiece events to Russia, Qatar, Brazil, and China (Pender, 2022). They will, and should, highlight that states like the United Kingdom and America, can sportswash too; will the US use the upcoming 2026 World Cup to cover up some of its wrongdoings at, for example, its border with Mexico? Did the UK utilise the London Olympics to launder away its sins in the English Channel?

Purveyors of sportswashing may point to the fact that it is not illegal, just unethical, in doing so, testing the moral palatability of audiences around the world, to whom, the beauty and thrill of some sporting moments, is still able to mask these ugly truths and keep us coming back for more. But for how long? I personally will not be watching the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar later on this year (a fact made easier by my native Ireland’s consistent failure to qualify for international tournaments), and there have been large-scale calls for boycotts, but it is hard to say whether or not these will materialise. The fact of the matter is, once the festivities start, many will prefer to temporarily erase Qatar’s human rights abuses and corruption charges, instead opting for the classic: “Let’s just focus on the sport”, as if sports and politics can be compartmentalised into two independent entities. If there is one thing I have learned during this project, it is that sport and politics are inextricably linked, and that the result of this ill-favoured union is sportswashing.

Many sporting bodies will in the future approach a sportswashing crossroads where they will be confronted by two choices; money or morals. And in a world driven by KPIs and profit margins, the superior bottom line that partaking in sportswashing seems able to consistently provide would point towards a continuation of this trend in the future.

9.4 Sportswashing Solutions

Sportswashing is a big issue for football and sport in general. Organising bodies and regulators have failed to effectively control the negative externalities resulting from sportswashing strategies being pursued by the likes of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The repercussions of this inaction and failure has been to the detriment of the game. What then can be done to push back against sportswashing? What can states, administrative bodies, and clubs do to shield themselves from the destructive forces of sportswashing, while also safeguarding the competitive nature of the competitions, as well as the communities, in which they participate? Current regulation has completely failed the EPL, leaving porous gaps in the competition's structure that calculating and conniving actors are more than happy to plug, while practices such as limitless bankrolling, sugar daddy-ing, and financial doping continue undeterred, knowing away and distorting the wealth distribution and thus the competitive balance of the competition.

A good place to begin to look for solutions requires us to cast our eyes to Germany's Bundesliga, where the allegiance to the notion of fan sovereignty is devout. In 1998, the German football authorities introduced the fan-ownership model or the 50+1 rule in order to better protect the league and its teams, by giving fans the chance to determine a club's direction and affairs by becoming a member and participating in club and league beyond the standard role of a simple consumer (Irving, 2020). The ruling stipulates that in order to compete in the Bundesliga, a team must own the majority of its own voting rights, ensuring the club's members/fans retain control and protecting teams from external actors (Honigstein 2009). As such, the main objective of German clubs is in their provision of social value to the communities they serve, rather than profit maximisation.

The legislation is not without its faults and has been criticised by some German clubs arguing that it breaches EU competition rules, however, any attempts to overrule 50+1 have thus far failed spectacularly (Conn, 2009). There are also clubs who have gained exemptions from the ruling owing to their having been owned by a corporation or individual continuously for 20 years prior to its implementation, meaning that VfL Wolfsburg (Volkswagen), Bayer 04 Leverkusen (Bayer) and 1899 Hoffenheim (SAP) are all exempt. Red Bull Leipzig, another Bundesliga club, have also side-stepped the rule by rejecting or pricing out members who are not agents of its holding company, Red Bull GmbH (Oltermann, 2014). And while there are clearly several benefits to such a structure, the 50+1 rule has not fixed the competitive imbalance in German football, with Bayern Munich completely dominating the league, collecting the title at a canter in each of the last ten seasons. For this then, the privately-owned clubs in England do bring about some semblance of competitive balance, but at a high cost.

While certainly not a perfect mandate, nor a built-for-purpose fix, an adaptation of 50+1 in the EPL would give fans a greater say in the running of their clubs, shifting some sovereignty back in their favour, while also ensuring clubs do not become targets of sportswashers and other such actors who do not have the clubs best interest at heart. Calls for such an ownership structure have been increasing, especially in the wake of the failed European Super League, which all German clubs

rejected, in comparison to the top English sides who went along with it until sheepishly withdrawing following severe fan backlash. And while this would represent a seismic shift in the institutional design of English football that would be met with much resistance and by many obstacles, ever-rising fan disillusionment and alienation could pave the way for such a model in the near future, as it has recently done so in Sweden, where a close variation of 50+1 is now in operation.

Next, we should look to America, where despite there existing massive fundamental differences between the organisation of sport in America and Europe (Van Bottenburg, 2003), there are still some valuable lessons that can be distilled from analysing how American sporting bodies are run. One such feature of American sport is the salary cap. These caps curtail reckless, unsustainable spending, improve within-league competitiveness, while protecting clubs and players, who are represented by a union that negotiates a salary cap with the leagues, be that the NBA or the NFL. The salary cap has been a great success in the US, improving the competitive nature of its league, increasing profits of all teams, big and small, and leading to a better distribution of talent across leagues, which prevents talent hoarding, which is commonplace amongst the wealthy and elite clubs of England and Europe. A salary cap has been introduced in the third and fourth divisions of English football, however, this was to prevent a handful of clubs from entering administration owing to the financial instability that the institutional structure of English football brings about, rather than for reasons of equitability or in order to level the extremely uneven playing field.

Another element of American sport that Europeans could learn a lot about is related to the equitable distribution of revenues amongst a league's members. For example, in the NFL revenue is pooled with teams earning below the league average receiving cash transfers and broadcasting income from teams who have earned over the prescribed average. The logic behind this is simple; a fairer league is more competitive, which in turn attracts more fans. In Europe's Big Five leagues, revenue is distributed using a weighting system dependent on broadcasting reach and audience (which works in favor of the biggest clubs), as well as final league positions (which also benefits the bigger clubs). This makes it extremely difficult for smaller teams to break the cycle of dominance held by elite clubs. A more balanced league environment will lessen the appeal for clubs to allow sportswashers to takeover.

A final measure to counteract sportswashing would be the replacement and improvement of the EPL's current fit and proper ownership tests, which have obviously not been built for purpose. This would involve, for example, the establishment of ethics committees, the introduction of comprehensive codes of conduct, and the imposition of more severe sanctions. The EPLs currently operates three fit and proper person tests with the aim of 1) preventing anyone who lacks integrity from becoming an owner/director, 2) preventing anyone who does not have the long-term business interests of the club from getting involved, and 3) preventing anyone with a criminal record from ownership/directorship (Medhi, 2016). Clearly these tests lack any reliability if the Saudi PIF, chaired by MBS, has passed them with flying colours, although this should not be surprising, when one considers the list of colorful characters who have been involved with EPL clubs over the years, only three men have ever failed the test (The Guardian, 2014), while several have passed without explanation (ex-Manchester City owner and Thai prime minister passed the test a year after being involved in a military coup), the league not disclosing any information about their assessments unless they conclude the party is unfit to be an owner (Hamil and Walters, 2013). The main issue with these tests is that the league cannot prevent a party from owning a club unless they have been criminally charged (Walters and Hamil, 2010). An improved test should there consider the disqualification of anyone who is subject to an investigation or believed to be involved in a crime anywhere in the world, along with superior vetting mechanisms.

9.5 Future Research

This paper has demonstrated the need to take a new perspective on sportswashing that will hopefully guide future research on the subject. The qualitative design of this research has seen the empirical phenomenon that is sportswashing be built up step by step, such that it ends with a comprehensive conceptual framework through which the dynamics of sportswashing may be better understood now and in the future. Scholars in the future may use this work to formulate their own hypotheses on sportswashing, or it may kick start some much-needed academic debate on the matter, while also acting as a future point of departure for quantitative research on the topic.

It would be fascinating to see if a statistical causal link could be established between say, the purchasing of a football team by country/party X and whether this led to people altering their perceptions about X. Furthermore, any future works that contributed to the understanding of the psychology that underpins sportswashing by looking at concepts such as classical conditioning (Chen et al., 2012) would be of great value. In order to garner a more complete and balanced understanding of sportswashing, the field would benefit from the study of “Western” and “democratic” states, such as the United States and United Kingdom, who utilise sportswashing. This would be a welcome pivot away from the current obsession on non-democratic regimes from Asia, Africa, and South America, who in reality, are not an overwhelming majority of the world’s sportswashers. Additionally, a richer engagement with the ethical considerations of various stakeholders involved with sportswashing could be highly salient and insightful.

10. Conclusion

Football was traditionally seen as a form of escapism for fans and players alike, however, the game has been contrived by dark forces, to whom it does offer an escape from criticism. A shady underworld has plagued football and weaponised it for political gain. Nation-states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia have literally inserted themselves into the social fabric of cities like Manchester and Newcastle. Are both football clubs now essentially acting as emissaries for the Gulf States in the UK?. The fact that I am even asking such a question is frightening, but it underlies the hypocrisy of sport and the extent to which sportswashing has penetrated football. I suppose this is what happens when you hand cultural institutions over to despots. They call football the “Beautiful Game”, however, beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, and this beholder is horrified by what he sees. The game is in dire need of some extensive soul-searching. Football cannot continue in this manner. Clubs are being propped up by ultra-rich owners and television income that is offering teams a false facade of stability and sustainability, while also promoting wholly irresponsible behaviour that is threatening the future viability of the game.

It is blatantly obvious then that organisations like the Premier League, UEFA, and FIFA are more concerned with protecting their commercial interests than protecting the clubs and communities they claim to represent. For this they should be punished, and not least for the fact, that they have allowed their organisation to become hubs for sportswashing, corruption, and dirty money. Token preventative measures offered up by these administrators such as financial fair play have proven futile, simply by-passed by some basic creative accounting.

Newcastle and Manchester City have become true sportswashing vectors, the Newcastle case proving that history is repeating itself. And I would not bet against it repeating itself again and again in the coming years. Since the NUFC takeover, sportswashing (and Saudi Arabia) has rarely been out of the headlines, whether it is the controversial, Saudi-backed LIV Golf Tour, or the contentious Formula 1 Grand Prix in Riyadh. Quinn (2022) reported that the Saudi backers of LIV are paying the new tour's premier name, Phil Mickelson, \$200 million to join up with them, while Tiger Woods was offered \$1 billion. The impact of sportswashing has been clear; the dilution of traditional sporting competitions and the tainting of global sporting events, not least, the Winter Olympics and the World Cup. Sportswashers portray themselves as benevolent benefactors, depicting their acquisitions and actions as banal and beneficial to all, when in reality, their behavior is corrupting society from within, desensitising people from, for example, human rights abuses and war crimes. Most will turn a blind eye but this conduct is insidious and nothing short of Machiavellian. How thorough a wash can sport provide? Seemingly a quite meticulous and comprehensive one.

Perhaps the Streisand Effect, that is, a phenomenon that occurs when attempts to conceal something has the unintended consequences of actually increasing awareness of it (Hagenbach and Koessler, 2017), may play a role in exposing sportswashing in the future. Sportswashers, however, seem content with the expectation that controversies will simply fade away as the news cycle changes, and that despite any initial backlash, people will eventually just move on. I think it would be fair to say that the Saudis have successfully managed to change the conversation from Khashoggi and Yemen, to golf and Newcastle, a reflection of the apparent success of their sportswashing strategy, as well as a testament to their ability to set the terms of the prevailing narratives and conversations as they see fit. The Saudis for one, do not appear to be resting on their laurels either. They have just signed up Lionel Messi, perhaps the greatest and most famous footballer of all time, to be a tourism ambassador for the Kingdom (Zidan, 2022). The reach of Saudi oil money truly knows no bounds, as one of the most recognisable people on the planet has just become a cheerleader for a bloodstained regime.

On the role of fans, can a NUFC or MCFC fan truly follow their club without supporting their owners?. This is a matter for each fan to personally ponder, but I doubt NUFC will see their attendances drop next season, if anything, they are set to explode, with fans, old and new, clamoring to see Newcastle's nouveau-riche squad take to the pitch. And what of the often cited but rarely seen boycott?. The tagline of the opposition against the ignominious European Super League, "football without the fans is nothing", is particularly salient and potentially somewhat sardonic now. It is true that fans command a significant amount of power in sport, be it financial, cultural, or symbolic. But the dependence of sporting organisations on fans seems to be diminishing, the hyper-commercialisation of sport meaning that such entities can now call upon a myriad of varied revenue streams.

Meanwhile, the globalisation of sport means that if your true, local, die-hard fans, were to jump ship, so to speak, there are millions of fans all over the world who can simply step in to take their place. It is difficult therefore to imagine a large enough boycott that would fundamentally impact the bottom line of sportswashers. Additionally, millions of sports fans all over the world, live for and organise their lives around their beloved team, for many, their love for the game will simply trump considerations off the field. Sportswashers like Saudi Arabi are therefore tapping into a multi-generational, community-based loyalty that is very difficult to turn one's back on. While many fans may choose to pretend their proprietor simply does not matter or even exist, there is no doubt that it is a deeply uncomfortable position to be in when one's own hard-earned cash spent on club merchandise and matchday tickets is being funneled into autarkic regimes, who buy our acquiescence by bank-rolling our team's success.

Such is the level of buy-in and adoration from the Newcastle fans towards the Saudis that they have decided that they have sufficient wiggle room that they may re-brand the team's third kit into a Saudi-themed one. A ridiculous proposition that also offers us a glimpse into the power of sportswashing when wielded competently; buy a club and run it well, the fans, and then the entire city will follow. We have already seen this in action in Manchester; when their Abu Dhabi owners are criticised online, an army of Mancunians (supported by a healthy cast of fake bot accounts and real-life trolls hired by the regime) will fervently defend their Gulf overlords on the back of dubious, state-produced propaganda and lies.

Is it then, even possible to be an ethical fan in the epoch of sportswashing? Sport has reached a moral breaking point and if sport's elites are explicitly backing sportswashing, either through their actions (or inaction), what then, can a single fan do? What say did the fans have in the takeover in the first place? None. Have the Saudis then, once again struck oil with their takeover of NUFC? Only time will tell, but lessons from MCFC would point towards this being a winning formula. To see their success as anything other than sportswashing by the UAE is to be blind to the reality of the situation.

Sportswashing is, at its core, about power. Its recent proliferation is a reflection of changing power plays, dynamics, and structures around the world. Leaders and states like MBS in Saudi Arabia have realised that displays of hard power are no longer as effective as they have been in the past, while its palpability to foreign and domestic audiences (as evidenced by Russia's excommunication following its invasion of Ukraine) is constantly on the wane. Even the brash crown prince has accepted that a level of decorum and subtlety that is simply not attainable through conventional warfare, is required if he is to realise his lofty ambitions. The rules of the game are changing and this has opened up the space for more crafty and sophisticated power projection tools like sportswashing, which has truly penetrated and will form the basis of the new geopolitical economy of sport for years to come, that is grounded in unabashed capitalism, where profit and power are the ultimate goals, as heritage, history, community, and identity, fall to the wayside (Chadwick, 2022).

From a personal point of view, at the beginning of this project I was an ardent Manchester City fan. By the project's close I am a disillusioned Manchester City fan, who is questioning not only his dedication and loyalty to a team, but to the sport in general. Games have become less and less riveting, knowing the causes and consequences of my team's success and I no longer wish to drink from the poisoned chalice that is Manchester City fandom. And while sportswashing has bought Manchester City unrivaled success, it has come at a colossal expense (not just in a monetary sense); the club, and the wider game is losing its soul. But all the blame should not land at the door of the sportswashers, after all, they have done nothing illegal and no one has tried to stop them or make their life's difficult, in fact, they have been welcomed with open arms, by governments, clubs, and communities. Indeed, this problem is symptomatic of much wider issues in society with these developments in football and sportswashing reflecting those we can observe in society at large, the primary manifestation of this being that sportswashing is part of a broader shift toward non-Western dominance in both sports and politics. Sportswashing is also a fallout of society's compulsion and enthusiasm for money. Sportswashing may thus be looked as a gamble on the fickleness of human nature, that fans can have their heads turned by the promise of success. The gamble, so far, seems to be paying off.

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