



UNIVERSITY OF THE PELOPONNESE

FACULTY OF HUMAN MOVEMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE
SCIENCES, DEPARTMENT OF SPORTS ORGANIZATION AND
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The phenomenon of Sportswashing in the Olympic Games: historical
background, legacy and the path to mitigation

By Vasileios Sgouros

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Approved by the Professor body:

1st Supervisor: Thierry Zintz Assis. Prof. K U LEUVEN, BELGIUM

2nd Supervisor: Konstantinos Georgiadis Prof. UNIVERSITY OF PELOPONNESE GREECE

3rd Supervisor: Marios Papaloukas Prof. UNIVERSITY OF PELOPONNESE GREECE

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Abstract

Sport has been an important aspect of human endeavour since ancient times and has always been intertwined with social values and growth. However, it has also been observed that sports have repeatedly been used throughout history to embellish the actions of regimes, such as the Nazi Berlin 1936 Olympics, which are considered by some to be the first example of what is now called ‘sportswashing’. The aim of this paper is to conduct a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) of the phenomenon of sportswashing focusing on the following aspects: definitions and related terms, historical overview, legacy and ways of mitigation. Through the examination of academic and grey literature on the topic, it is concluded that, despite the overlap between sportswashing and soft power, a key differentiator is the existence of questionable moral practices in the former. Moreover, the historical overview of the phenomenon highlights that although the term was coined recently, the phenomenon is by no means new. Lastly, negative consequences of sportswashing include manipulation of information, which in turn allows for distraction from, minimisation or normalisation of unethical practices. Sportswashing can be combated through the introduction of a concrete framework that makes respect for human rights and other ethical requirements a prerequisite for any kind of engagement within the world of sport.

Key words: sportswashing, soft power, public diplomacy, distraction, minimisation, normalisation, prevention, mitigation

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I. Introduction

Sport has been an important aspect of human endeavour since ancient times and has always been intertwined with social values and growth. In recent years sport has come to play a pivotal role in both political and social issues as the development of sporting events has become not only a source of revenue for hosting nations but also a means of leveraging a nation's image abroad. Arguably, sports mega events have emerged as a site for boosting national economies as well as rejuvenating international reputations (Boykoff, 2022). However, it has also been observed that sports have repeatedly been used throughout history to embellish the actions of regimes, such as the Nazi Berlin 1936 Olympics, which are considered by some to be the first example of what is now called 'sportswashing'.

The term sportswashing is a neologism which has become a mainstay of media reporting associated with the 2022 World Cup hosted by Qatar. Broadly speaking, it can be defined as the diverse ways in which a country invests in sport in order to enhance its reputation on a global scale and divert attention from less positive perceptions of its institutions and actions. However, although the concept has attracted considerable attention in the last year, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. The term was coined in 2015 by the human rights campaigner Gulnara Akhundova in relation to a high-profile sports event, the European Games, which were being held in Baku, Azerbaijan, although the country suffers from a poor human rights record (Skey, 2022b). The term is a portmanteau word made up of 'sports' and 'whitewash' to refer precisely to actions that are meant to effectively wash off the negative perceptions using sports as a means. The term became more popular in 2018 when it was used by Amnesty International to attract attention to the relationship between the violation of Human Rights in Russia in the 2010s and the fact that Russia was allowed to host both the Sochi 2014 Olympic Winter Games and the 2018 World Cup (Frommer, 2022). Amnesty International also used the term to refer to the way in which the ownership of Manchester City FC attempted to enhance the image of the Dhawi royal family by means of sponsoring sporting venues (Watson, 2018). The use of the term sportswashing suggests that rather than sport competitions being apolitical, they tend to benefit governments that pursue unacceptable policies.

Since the term was introduced in 2015, it has also been used in relation to a number of other events including the Beijing 2022 Olympic Winter Games, which took place against the backdrop of systematic abuses of the Uyghur minority in China by the Chinese Communist Party (Fromer, 2022). Interestingly, the concept has also been applied retroactively to describe historical sporting events where human rights concerns had emerged. As has already been mentioned, the Berlin 1936 Olympic Games are a case in point since the athletic community was faced with the task of ensuring that the Games would not be used to promote Nazi ideology. However, despite assurances that qualified Jewish athletes would be allowed to join the German team, when the Games took place there was only one Jewish athlete on the German team, while Nazi propaganda ran rampant (Frommer, 2022). Similarly, the 1978 World Cup which took place in Argentina failed to take into account the fact that the military government in the country had committed systematic human rights abuses (Frommer, 2022). These two events highlight the fact that although ‘sportswashing’ may be a recently coined term, the concept has existed for much longer.

Interestingly, the concept of using sport to wield political power or to boost a state’s image is also being described through other terms including soft power and sports diplomacy. Chen and Doran (2022) point out that nowadays sportswashing entails the utilisation of sport as propaganda in order to promote soft-power coercion, nationalist strategies and the cover-up of problems and scandals. The standard model through which the manipulation of soft power through sports is analysed are the Olympic Games, which, as mega-events, offer significant opportunities for such manipulation to take place. However, the range of sportswashing incidents nowadays is expanding well beyond the Olympic framework, prompting scholars to dig deeper into the relationship between politics and sports. Thus, sportswashing emerges as a far more complex topic than merely a country hosting an event to improve its GDP or boost its image every four years; nowadays, the infiltration of a political agenda into the sports world necessitates a better understanding of the practices behind this phenomenon as well as ways of mitigating it.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: a brief literature review presents seminal articles related to sportswashing and highlights issues that arise regarding the concept. This is followed by a methodology chapter, outlining the process adopted for the gathering and analysis of pertinent information. Subsequently, the analysis and

discussion chapter present the synthesis of the information obtained through the systematic literature review conducted. This chapter is divided into subsections, each of which deals with a different aspect: firstly, the issue of definitional overlap is examined through an extensive discussion of related terms such as soft power and sports diplomacy; secondly, a historical overview of the phenomenon is attempted, both within the Olympic context and outside it, discussing in detail events from antiquity to the present that qualify as sportswashing; thirdly, the legacy of sportswashing is explored in terms of positive and negative effects, before engaging in a discussion of ways of preventing or at least mitigating the phenomenon. The final chapter of this dissertation presents the conclusions reached, as well as limitations of the research conducted and suggestions for future research.

II. Literature Review

As the term ‘sportswashing’ is a relatively recent concept, there is limited academic literature on the topic; however, the research that has been undertaken is thorough and contemporary, which allows it to highlight key issues that need to be addressed. This brief literature review looks at seminal articles on the issue of sportswashing, which identify the key issues that need to be addressed in the systematic literature review, which follows later in this paper.

A seminal article by Skey (2022a) discusses how sportswashing as a neologism is increasingly appearing in the media in recent years and highlights the limited academic discussion of the term that exists. Skey (2022a) also points out that currently there is no sustained analysis of what this newly coined concept can contribute to the study of sports. The main objectives of this paper are firstly to identify the connections between sport and other types of ‘washing’, such as whitewashing and greenwashing and to pinpoint similarities and differences in approach. Secondly, the paper aims to identify the position that sportswashing as a construct holds not only in existing literature but also on state relations, with a view to assessing the difference between this term and other related terms such as propaganda, soft-power, public diplomacy and place branding. Finally, the paper considers the usefulness of the concept at present. Skey (2022a) concludes that sportswashing revolves around consociation rather than explicit deception, as it aims to build positive connotations for the involved country rather than simply conceal condemnable practices. Moreover, the practice of sportswashing focuses on the activities of state actors who collaborate with national or supranational sporting organisations. Interestingly, Skey points out that so far, the term has only been used pejoratively, unlike terms such as ‘soft power’ which are generally considered legitimate actions of states. Lastly, it is pointed out that the term has so far only been used to describe a narrow scope of state actors, all of whom are situated outside the Western world. Overall, the contribution of this paper lies in the fact that it highlights the main issues that surround the term sportswashing, effectively pinpointing which areas of research are underdeveloped.

Fruh et al. (2023) begin their discussion on sportswashing by mentioning a non-Olympic event, the 2022 FIFA Men’s World Cup which was awarded to Qatar. Qatar’s

interest has been largely described as a clear case of sportswashing. The paper in question provides a detailed account of the nature of sportswashing, a practice which aims to alter the way that others perceive an ethical violation for which the state actor is responsible. The authors highlight a variety of ways in which this is achieved including distracting attention from the actual wrongdoing, normalising it or minimising it. The paper goes on to offer an account of the problems that emerge as a result of sportswashing practices, with the most serious one being the perpetuation of injustice that sportswashing enables. Fruh et al. (2023) emphasises the duality of the unacceptability of sportswashing in that it makes participants in sport, including athletes, coaches, fans and journalists, complicit in the wrongdoing; additionally, sportswashing is responsible for corrupting the heritage of sporting traditions and institutions. Lastly, the paper examines various ways in which sportswashing can be dealt with, by distinctly discussing the different roles that groups of people such as athletes or journalists have to play. The authors acknowledge that there is a dichotomy in resistant strategies, as one way of resisting is to refuse to participate in the sporting event and another to modify engagement aiming to enable transformation. The paper undertakes a significant discussion not only of the phenomenon of sportswashing, but also of its repercussions and ways of mitigating the negative outcomes.

Similarly, Boykoff (2022) acknowledges that sportswashing has emerged forcefully in the 21st century, highlighting the discrepancy between word and deed in the sports world. The author points out that there is substantial definitional imprecision and that the term is exclusively applied to autocratic hosts, rather than democratic regimes. The article offers a concrete definition of sportswashing and also establishes a sportswashing typology using the soft power approach to mega events as a basis. The contribution of the paper in the conceptualisation of sportswashing lies in the following: firstly, the concept is not exclusively linked to autocratic states but can make its appearance in democracies as well; secondly, domestic audiences play a vital role in understanding how politically complex sportswashing is; thirdly, it is often the case that sportswashing may set the stage for military intervention; and lastly, new forms of sportswashing are constantly emerging, such as teams and events in democratic states being funded by authoritarian regimes. Boykoff (2022) concludes that sportswashing manifests itself in complex ways, while also revealing political fault lines and illustrating economic contradictions. Moreover, the author contends that depending on

the audience, sportswashing can either be ‘intoxicating’ or ‘toxic’ (Boykoff, 2022; p. 349). Despite approaching the topic from a more philosophical perspective, the paper offers valuable insights into the complexities associated with sportswashing as a construct and how it eventually leads to dismemberment of the historical collective memory regarding a group or culture.

Focusing on the negative outcomes associated with sportswashing, Chen and Doran (2022) investigate a number of sports news stories dealing with sportswashing, featuring both governments and organisations that use sports as veneer to conceal or disguise inhumane acts, political controversies or scandals. The authors begin by providing a historical overview of sportswashing incidents dating back as early as 1335 BC with the dramatisation of Egyptian superiority over the subjugated Nubians and culminating in the 2022 Winter Olympics hosted in Beijing. Acknowledging that nowadays a marked increase in sportswashing incidents is observed, the authors highlight the dichotomy that characterises the term, giving rise to an interesting discussion about whether sportswashing is essentially a political issue, whereby economy and power often become more important than right or wrong. Chen and Doran conclude that sporting events can easily become a double-edged sword: although proper planning and goodwill can go a long way towards helping a nation build its image, boost its economy and enhance its reputation globally. It is also true that sporting events can be exploited in order to disguise wrongdoing, scandals and corruption, thereby promoting a distorted image of the host country. This puts event planners, sponsors and athletes in a quandary regarding whether or not participation amounts to condoning such acts. The authors stress the importance of education in personal ethics, soft power mechanisms and critical thinking as a means of ensuring that sporting events are used to bring positive influence in terms of improving public health, promoting socialisation and social inclusion as well as cultural integration and conflict resolution.

Lastly, Ganji (2023) explores the rise of sportswashing through the lens of sponsoring and owning sports franchises, a method which enables investment empires like Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to infiltrate the value chains of the sporting sector. The author asserts that the activities undertaken by such states use information manipulation to integrate state interests in the essence of open societies; thus, it is only through the enhanced understanding of the mechanics of sportswashing that democratic states and actors can recognise and combat this emerging phenomenon. The paper

begins by discussing the difference between sportswashing in the 20th and 21st centuries: whereas sportswashing in the former century involved specific mega events such as the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the latter century incorporates a much wider set of practices, enabling autocratic states to ‘infiltrate societies in free countries’ (Kasparov, 2021) and in turn upscaling the involvement of such actors in global sports. Furthermore, the author identifies information manipulation as the key characteristic of sportswashing instances rather than the mere involvement of an autocratic state in an event of sporting organisation. Three ways of information manipulation are identified, namely: firstly, displacing negative content by promoting alternate narratives and creating a smoke screen; secondly, discrediting negative content by reinforcing alternative perspectives; thirdly, debasing negative content through the introduction of alternative emotions, similarly to augmented reality practices. The author contends that these forms of sportswashing actually create an environment in which actors are made to ‘see no evil, hear no evil and feel no evil’ (Ganji, 2023; p. 8). The author goes on to discuss how the aforementioned investment empires effectively engage in sportswashing practices in various sports, with Qatar being the most prominent in football. Following a detailed discussion of related activities, the author discusses ways in which actors in open societies should respond, highlighting the different roles played by diverse stakeholders such as local franchises, national federations, transnational corporations and governing bodies. It is concluded that by embedding human rights standards in organisations, sportswashing can be mitigated.

Overall, existing literature on sportswashing reveals the ambiguity of definitions that exists as well as the wide range of activities that fall under its scope. More importantly, negative outcomes are repeatedly underscored, while the association of the practice with non-democratic states also emerges as a topic of discussion.

III. Methodology

In this study, the exploratory approach is followed, aiming to identify and analyse the various aspects associated with the phenomenon of sportswashing. According to Robson (2002), an exploratory study attempts to “[detect] what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and to assess phenomena in a new light”. This paper seeks to conduct a systematic literature review (SLR) of sources on the topic of sportswashing. This research method identifies, selects and critically evaluates existing research in order to answer a concrete research question (Dewey and Drahota, 2016). Systematic literature reviews follow a well-defined research protocol with clearly stated criteria and consists of a comprehensive search carried out over databases and grey literature. Pittway (2008) identifies the seven principles underlying SLRs as: transparency, clarity, integration, focus, equality, accessibility, coverage. Thus, given the importance of providing a comprehensive coverage of existing literature on sportswashing, emphasis was placed on identifying and accessing the bulk of material relevant to the topic. Initially, a preliminary key word search was conducted on the databases Emerald Insight, Research Gate and JStor. The keywords used for the search included: sportswashing, soft power, mega events, Olympic Games. The results that emerged were scanned in terms of abstracts to ascertain the level of relevance. Subsequently, additional string searches were performed on Google Scholar employing the same keywords as in previous searches and adhering to the same process of scanning abstracts for relevance. Lastly, one more search was conducted combining the keywords sportswashing, effects, prevention/mitigation in order to find sources discussing these topics more extensively. The rationale behind these searches was to identify as much of the extant literature on the topic in order to fulfil the ‘coverage’ criterion set out by Pittway (2008) as well as the ‘transparency’ criterion by the same scholar.

Once the search process was complete, abstracts of studies were scanned in order to eliminate any that were not relevant to the topic under investigation, thereby fulfilling Pittway’s (2008) ‘focus’ criterion. However, given that the term ‘sportswashing’ is very specific, there were only two sources that were eliminated, as they focused on comparing sportswashing with other forms of ‘washing’, such as greenwashing or whitewashing. Articles that were written in languages other than English were also

eliminated for practical reasons. With regard to the time frame, the articles used as sources were all written after 2015, when the term was coined; however, in the discussion of definitions and similar constructs such as soft power and diplomacy, earlier sources were also used. This is also true of the discussion of the historical overview of the concept, where events that took place before 2015, such as the 1936 Berlin Olympics, are discussed and analysed through the prism of sportswashing. Moreover, the articles used were also scanned in terms of references to ensure that all relevant bibliographic material has been located. Following this process, a final list of studies to be included emerged. It should also be highlighted that the sources used included both academic articles from peer reviewed journals such as the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* and the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, as well as articles published in reputable newspapers such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. The latter were deemed very useful in that they conveyed concerns expressed by various actors within the sport sector and provided up-to-date insights into sportswashing practices.

As soon as the final list of sources was compiled, the following process was initiated: firstly, the articles were carefully read and information regarding the topic was colour-coded so that it could be used in the following stage. Colour-coding of information was performed based on the chapters outlined in the introduction of this paper to ensure that no relevant information was omitted. Wherever different views on sportswashing emerged, additional notes were inserted in the text to make sure that these were not overlooked, and the ‘transparency’ and ‘equality’ criteria cited by Pittway (2008) were satisfied. Another key factor that was given particular attention was the conceptual framework used by each scholar, given that the term sportswashing tends to overlap with other similar concepts. The conclusions documented in each article were meticulously recorded, with a specific focus on any recommendations made by authors regarding how the phenomenon can be prevented or mitigated. Particular attention was paid to conclusions that deviated from those of the majority to ensure a balanced discussion as well as to enable identification of new emerging debates in the literature.

On completion of this time-consuming process, the results and conclusions obtained were further analysed to identify points of convergence and divergence as well as blurry areas in need of further scholarly attention. As will be explained subsequently, a clear distinction was made between studies focusing on the theoretical aspect of

sportswashing and those which describe, evaluate and analyse specific incidents which have been acknowledged as sportswashing examples in the literature. Moreover, a distinction was made between Olympic and non-Olympic sportswashing to facilitate a discussion of the former in relation the Olympic values and the Olympic Charter. As a result, the material obtained from the sources was grouped under headings so that findings could be more easily and clearly presented and compared.

The aforementioned headings were used to formulate the chapters in the analysis and discussion chapter of this dissertation, where a synthesis of findings from the literature is attempted in order to provide useful insights into various aspects of the phenomenon of sportswashing. In each of the sections a presentation of evidence and views from the literature is followed by a discussion of the validity of the points made and the partial conclusions that can be reached. The values and limitations of each source are thoroughly evaluated in order to establish the validity of claims and to allow for conclusions to be reached.

IV. Analysis and Discussion

This chapter brings together the insights gained from the analysis of relevant literature. The first subsection focuses on the issue of definitions, as a significant overlap is observed in the literature. This is followed by a historical overview of the phenomenon of sportswashing and a discussion of the effects that it has on various aspects of life and society. Subsequently, ways of preventing or at least mitigating the phenomenon are presented and evaluated.

i. The Issue of Definitions

In order to fully understand the concept of sportswashing and its characteristics, it is vital to examine it in juxtaposition with similar concepts and constructs which have been around for a longer period of time and have attracted significant scholarly attention. Such concepts include soft power, propaganda, place branding and sports diplomacy.

i.i. Soft Power

Soft power, a term coined by political scientist J.S. Nye (Soyland, 2020), sees reliance on economic wealth and military strength as insufficient for the realisation of foreign policy goals. Nye (2004, p.5) contends that soft power “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others” by means of co-optation instead of coercion. According to this concept, in an increasingly globalised world where rapid shifts prevail, new power resources become necessary as countries are required to adapt to new challenges. Military threats and economic sanctions are losing their coercive power, thereby promoting seeking power through attraction (Soyland, 2020). Therefore, it is argued that soft power co-opts people to align their desires with those of others, rather than coercing them. Through attaining admiration, states ensure attraction to their values, policies and culture, prompting outsiders to form their behaviour according to the state’s interests in the international arena. Soyland (2020) acknowledges that soft power and

public diplomacy are closely linked, as the latter is a tool used by governments to showcase national characteristics, especially at an age when information explosion has triggered scarcity of attention, causing what has been called the ‘paradox of plenty’ (Simon, 2008). In other words, overexposure to information prevents people from identifying the information that really matters, enabling those in a position to separate useful information from background noise to gain power. As a result, credibility becomes pivotal in exercising soft power, as the emphasis shifts from ‘winning the war’ to ‘winning the story’ (Nye, 2008).

This concept of soft power has often been criticised, as it fails to provide an explanation as to what is regarded as attractive in international relations. More specifically, Brooks and Woolforth (2002) have argued that the concept of soft power is overly western-centric and that it essentially mirrors neoliberalist views. This is further supported by Hall (2010) who distinguishes the political utility of the term from its analytic utility and emphasises the problematic concept of attraction. As soft power reaffirms the policies of those using the term, it proliferates western-dominated power relations, and has a ‘built-in blind spot’ for domestic considerations (Boykoff, 2022; p. 343). Additionally, Mattern (2005) views soft power merely as an extension of soft power. He argues that soft power is less closely linked to persuasion through attraction and more to impose ideas on a target audience, as those wielding soft power essentially construct a form of reality which is not based on evidence-based arguments but rather on representational force; thus, soft power relies on sociolinguistic coercion. Despite this criticism, a soft power framework is often deployed by scholars in their analysis of sports mega events such as the Olympics. This has led scholars to argue that there is an overlap between sportswashing and soft power in the sense that soft power can help in the understanding of sportswashing, while simultaneously sportswashing highlights the limitations of the soft power approach (Boykoff, 2022). A case in point is Saudi Arabia, whose efforts to leverage the effects of soft power have been labelled as sportswashing (Chadwick, 2022).

In conclusion, sports can function as a source of soft power, either by achieving high level performances by athletes or by successfully hosting sporting events to attract worldwide audiences and attention, which in turn enables them to showcase their attractiveness. Essentially, hosting mega events such as the Olympics is a form of public diplomacy, whereby a state seeks to create a favourable impression and enhance foreign

audience understanding (Sharp, 2009). Thus, such events create a unique opportunity for states to emphasise positive aspects and change negative aspects and stereotypes.

i.ii Sports Diplomacy

International relations scholars have long neglected the political use of sports, making sports diplomacy a promising but largely uncharted area of theory and practice (Murray, 2012). Especially in an increasingly globalised world, where states are constantly competing for attention and credibility, sports diplomacy can prove a valuable asset in the shaping of foreign policy. Diplomacy has traditionally been defined as “the conduct of relations between sovereign states with a standing in world politics by official agents and by peaceful means” (Bull, 1977, p. 156). In other words, diplomacy strives to achieve foreign policy goals through peaceful means, effectively making diplomacy the opposite of war. Throughout history, diplomats have played a crucial role in preserving relations and eliminating sources of friction between states globally (Murray, 2012). Sports on the other hand have been defined as “an institutionalized competitive activity that involves vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex physical skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors” (Soyland, 2020, p. 8). The definitions themselves point to an inherent contradiction in the term sports diplomacy: while diplomacy strives to reduce friction and improve relations, sport relies heavily on competition and the pursuit of victory. This has given rise to a dichotomy, whereby some view sports as tribalistic and nationalistic, while others highlight the potential of shared norms, culture, and values to foster international understanding and promote peace (Delay, 1999).

Globalisation combined with advances in technology and communications has given rise to a new backdrop against which diplomacy can be conducted, with public diplomacy dominating the scene primarily due to its adaptability (Murray, 2012). Public diplomacy engages a significantly higher number of actors both intra- and extra-governmental, as along with traditional diplomats anyone from celebrities to students and from athletes to researchers can take part. This trend towards public diplomacy has led to the emergence of new pathways to international relationships and new hybrid forms, one of which is sports diplomacy (Soyland, 2020). Sports diplomacy is defined

as “the use of sports people and events to engage, inform and create a favourable image amongst foreign publics and organizations to shape their perceptions in a way that is more conducive to achieving a government’s foreign policy goal” (Murray, 2012, p. 581).

The main motivators for states to conduct sports diplomacy have been identified by Murrey (2012) and include firstly the fact that sports diplomacy opens new avenues for a state to reach the public both domestically and internationally, while traditional diplomacy has often been condemned for being outdated, elitist and unable to engage with the public. In contrast, sports diplomacy allows a state to showcase its progressive stance in original and proactive ways. Secondly, the constantly increasing popularity of sports globally and the ensuing rise in appeal, power, and magnitude that sporting institutions and athletes enjoy prompt states to exploit this universal appeal. This is accentuated by the fact that it can be argued that no one openly claims to be against sport as such, as well as the fact that there seems to be a kind of moral myopia when it comes to the conduct of sport (Redeker, 2008). Thus, public diplomacy emerges as a much more effective method of attaining public attention and garnering support than hard power or high politics, especially during the information age where sport and culture have turned into viable foreign policy tools (Soyland, 2020).

In light of the above, it comes as no surprise that states place emphasis on hosting mega events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup, both of which attract billions of viewers and constitute prestigious projects, allowing countries to showcase their values and establish favourable reputations among international audiences, as well as remedy existing negative stereotypes. For example, Germany’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2006 highlights how the country was able to use this event as a public diplomacy tool to transform the stereotypically negative image of Germany among foreign audiences and to present the country as friendly and welcoming. Through the creation of numerous campaigns during the event aiming to create positive images of the counter, the state was able not only to generate national pride, but also to increase truism, with far-reaching positive effects (Grix & Houlihan, 2014). Similarly, the 2008 Beijing Olympics allowed China to portray itself internationally as a rising powerhouse, able to host a well-organised, spectacular event, which promoted Chinese values and culture across the international agenda (Soyland, 2020).

The connection between sports and diplomacy is not difficult to establish, as the former represents noble values that are appealing for diplomats and governments alike, especially since diplomacy revolves around the similar concepts of truth, patience, and loyalty. Consequently, sport can be employed as a medium through which to forge relationships that transcend cultural and ethnic divides and promote mutual understanding and respect (Murray, 2012). In a sense, an international athlete competing in a mega event, stops being just a sportsperson and becomes a diplomat representing their nation in the sporting arena, which is why the public has been seen to demand increased political and social awareness from athletes in recent years. Additionally, sports have been used repeatedly by estranged states in order to normalise their tense diplomatic relations (Soyland, 2020). For instance, the 1971 Ping Pong Diplomacy incident paved the way for the visit of US President Richard Nixon in the People's Republic of China in 1972, effectively putting an end to a long breakdown of diplomatic relations (Qingmin, 2013). More recently, in 2011, Pakistani Prime Minister Yousaf Raza accepted an invitation extended by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to watch the cricket World Cup semi-final between these countries (Murray, 2012); this came after decades of friction and near war, which highlights the potential of sports diplomacy to create a more positive atmosphere in state relations through sports, something that was the original aim of the Ancient Olympics as well.

i.iii Nation Branding

The term branding is usually associated with the marketing field; however, nation branding can be seen as a special area of place branding and has been defined as follows by Fan (2006): 'Nation branding concerns applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image' (Fan, 2006, p.6). Although there have been earlier versions of nation branding, they tended to focus more on tactics and were not cases of coherent, strategically planned activities (Kwuachuh, 2023). The term was originally coined in 1996 by Simon Anholt, and since then the term has been appearing in diverse disciplines. According to Gudjonsson (2005), nation branding takes place when a country or company uses its power to change a nation's image, by employing branding tools to change the attitudes, behaviour or even the identity of a

nation towards a more positive direction. The main initiator of nation branding is the government, either directly or indirectly. Moreover, nation branding is characterised by the creation and dissemination of symbols, territories and spaces for consumption, all of which are manifested in consumer investment in the country, which may take the form of purchasing products or spending money when visiting the country (Kwuachuh, 2023). It is also argued that the construct of nation branding and a brand state can be regarded as being as old as the creation of nations themselves, given that the transformation of states into nation-states in the 19th century was accompanied by the adoption of a national flag or a national anthem, which effectively set each country apart from others. This in turn helped create a national identity both for those within the state and for those outside it (Kwuachuh, 2023).

Similarly, Dinnie (2004) views nation branding as a practice employed by various states to build and manage their reputations, creating a specific image of themselves and attempting to incorporate symbolic characteristics which render them distinct as well as appealing. Using Anholt's (2004) 'nation brand hexagon', Dinnie (2004) discusses how positive perceptions of a country's political, commercial, cultural, and human assets as well as its tourist appeal and investment potential enable it to build a concrete brand differentiating it from other states. In other words, a nation's brand is the combination of these characteristics, which enables us to see the connection between nation branding and soft power. It can further be argued that by promoting their nation's brands through public diplomacy, countries are essentially using soft power; this brings us back to Nye's power of attraction and the use of co-optation rather than coercion to instill an appealing image of the given state not only in the eyes of foreigners, but also in the eyes of its own citizens. Interestingly, Dubinski (2019) pinpoints the proliferation of television coverage as well as the increasing role of private sponsorships as the turning point which enabled countries hosting mega events to engage more proactively in nation branding. He notes that American dominance as reflected by its influence on IOC revenues and growing TV rights deals created an environment that ushered in a commercialised era, during which countries shifted way from political agendas, prominent during the Cold War, and focused primarily on the commercial aspect of mega events. Throughout this period, nation branding and the promotion of tourism and products became a predominant objective, brushing aside – at least temporarily – the political focus of such events. It therefore becomes clear that nation branding is quite

distinct from sportswashing in the sense that its main goal is financial and commercial rather than political.

i.iv Sportswashing

The key concept to be discussed in this paper is sportswashing, which generally refers to authoritarian states using sports to improve their reputation (Lenskyj, 2020). However, as Boykoff (2022) points out, although the term is used extensively in sports writing and has even been chosen as word of the year in 2021, no concrete definition of it exists in literature. As a term, it is often only applied in authoritarian settings, as illustrated by the comment made by US Senator Ron Wyden: “right out of every autocrat’s playbook, covering up their injustices by misusing athletics in hopes of normalizing their abuses” (Canzano, 2022). Therefore, Boykoff (2022) defines sportswashing a “phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front” (Boykoff, 2022, p.343). More specifically, those who engage in sportswashing use mega events to bring economic and political advancement to their countries by building national prestige. Boykoff (2022) emphasises the fact that sportswashing can occur both in authoritarian and democratic states; in the latter, it can be used to shift attention away from unfair processes such as homelessness, gentrification, human rights violations or hyper-policing, with mega events being used to rationalise social issues. As a result, sportswashing can essentially ingrain reputational repair into the collective mind by using the culture of sport as a vehicle, which is why the recency of the term does not reflect the long history of the construct which can be traced back to antiquity.

Moreover, sportswashing does not adhere to a ‘one-size-fits-all’ model. As Boykoff (2022) contends, sportswashing can take on different forms depending on two key factors, namely political context and intended audience. The former refers to whether the country under discussion is democratic or authoritarian, while the latter refers to whether the intended audience is domestic or international (Figure 1). The combination of these two factors enables us to establish the political purpose of sportswashing, which may be geared towards prompting patriotism, deflect attention from social

problems, or assist in dealing with social problems. For instance, the organisers of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games addressed international audiences claiming that the games would lead to a human-rights renaissance in the country, while domestic messaging played a pivotal role in the 2014 Sochi Winter Games. Similarly, within the democratic context, 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics provided an opportunity for politicians to portray the US as a very safe place, in an attempt to lower the impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Lastly, the 2012 London Games were portrayed by organisers as unique opportunity to present the UK as a world-leading sporting nation as well as to inspire young audiences to take up sport (Boykoff, 2022). At this point, it should be noted that the intentions of organisers are not always fulfilled, as results may fall short of expectations and the eventual outcome be fairly minor (Bauman et al., 2021).

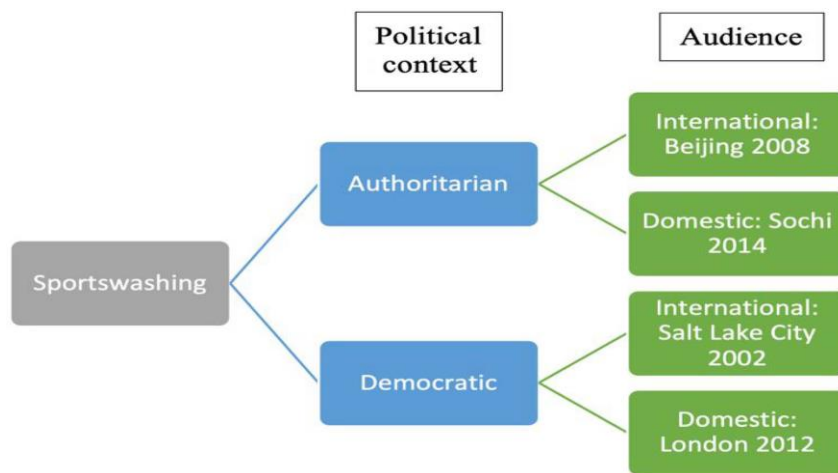


Figure 1: Sportswashing Typology (Boykoff, 2022)

Arguably, hosting mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games or the FIFA World Cup provides states with a unique opportunity to demonstrate state-of-the-art venues where globally renowned athletes compete, thereby fostering an association with the positively connoted world of sports rather than problematic issues (Lenskyj, 2020). This is further facilitated by the supposedly ‘apolitical’ nature of such events, which makes them all the more attractive to authoritarian states where dissent is minimal (Soyland, 2020). Another interesting point raised by Gibson (2014) is that democratic countries demonstrate a certain degree of scepticism when it comes to hosting such mega events due to the imposed burden on taxpayers, especially as allegations of lack of transparency, corruption and misconduct have adversely affected the reputation of organisations such as the IOC and FIFA; this in turn presents authoritarian states with an increased opportunity to bid for them and use them to improve their image.

On the other hand, although hosting mega sporting events can be used as a soft power tool to boost reputation, promote tourism, and attract inward investment, it can also be employed as a means of repression, helping to eliminate criticism of the government (Soyland, 2020). This is the essence of sportswashing, which however brings with it certain risks, the most significant one being the increased attention that it draws to a country's internal politics (Lenskyj, 2020). For instance, before the FIFA World Cup was held in Russia in 2018, a heated discussion about the lack of political and LGBT rights in the country was generated, while the controversies surrounding the FIFA World Cup held in Qatar in 2022 attracted significant media attention and engaged diverse actors in the discussion of rights (Jiménez-Martínez and Skey, 2018). However, it is interesting to note that the newsworthiness of such events seems to diminish once the competition begins and focus on sporting achievement is prioritised; this seems to indicate how powerful mega events are and how they are capable of setting and promoting their own agendas.

Sportswashing as used by authoritarian states does not only involve hosting mega events, but also investing heavily in global sports either through direct ownership or through sponsorship deals (Soyland, 2020). Football in particular has emerged as an ideal tool through which authoritarian regimes have attempted to change their reputation, because it is a very popular sport with an undeniable global reach. Thus, by constructing an association with renowned football clubs, such states seek to revamp their international image and use the positive image of the game to disguise human rights abuses and oppression among others. Well known examples include Manchester United and Paris St. Germain, both of which are teams owned by repressive regimes which have invested large sums of money in an attempt to create global brands that promote their countries' respective images (Ronay, 2019). In other words, these states have used the status of football as a global spectacle to launder their image, an objective that lies at the heart of sportswashing.

ii. Historical Overview

Despite being a relatively new term, sportswashing as a concept has been witnessed as far back as antiquity. The first part of this chapter explores incidents that can be viewed

as examples of sportswashing throughout history, while the second part examines examples of sportswashing that have been observed in the history of the modern Olympic Games. The extensive discussion of these events offers a valuable insight into the nature of the phenomenon as well as its prime characteristics.

ii.i Sportswashing in Antiquity

Key elements of the sportswashing concept have been traced by scholars as far back as 1335 BC, when wrestling tournaments were held in order to showcase the superiority of the Egyptians over the conquered Nubians; such events were depicted in tombs to illustrate the power of the Pharaoh (Carroll, 1998). Arguably, Egyptians were more advanced and sophisticated as a society, which would justifiably demonstrate itself in their physical prowess, yet these wrestling matches were also a form of propaganda serving to establish and cement control over the conquered Nubia: portraying Nubians as weaker highlighted the indisputable power of Pharaoh Akhenaton (Zidan, 2019).

The ancient Olympic Games of 416 BC have also been viewed by scholars as a sportswashing example. During the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, the former city-state entered several teams into the chariot race ensuring an uncontested victory; this success deflected attention away from the war front, where Athens was being beaten by Sparta, and created a more optimistic atmosphere within the city state (Rosenberg, 2022). Moreover, Alcibiades, the rising young Athenian politician who was behind the decision to enter the chariot team in the Olympics, capitalised on the success and exploited in an attempt to encourage further aggression. In a speech delivered in 415 BC, he used the recent Olympic victories as concrete evidence of the power of Athens and pressed for the immediate invasion of Sicily, which was at the time under the control of their opponents (Nielsen, 2014).

Similarly, Alexander the Great used athletic competitions as a prime Hellenising tool in colonies that had recently been conquered. Hosting the Olympic Games did not only involve demonstrating athletic prowess, but also became a propaganda exercise. As the event attracted dignitaries and ambassadors from all over Greece, the Olympic Games presented a unique opportunity for Alexander both to promote his dominance as a ruler and to forge his own image as a demigod (Miller, 2004).

What these events have in common is the fact that they, in all cases sporting events were used for purposes well outside the realm of athleticism; the main objectives were to promote image and consolidate power. In other words, there was a blend of sports with politics, for specific purposes, which is exactly what Baron Pierre de Coubertin sought to avoid when he revived the Olympic Games in the late 19th century. However, as will be demonstrated through the examples in the ensuing section, the world of sport has not been able to disentangle itself from politics and sportswashing for long.

ii.ii Sportswashing in the modern Olympic Games

Since the Olympic Games were revived in 1896 there have been repeated incidents and actions which have been retroactively characterised as sportswashing in academic literature. The list begins with the 1904 St. Louis Olympic Games, which have been portrayed by scholars as a very pro-American event, which revolved around showcasing the superiority of the US, open commercialisation of the event and the hierarchical categorisation of diverse cultures. In other words, the games were in fact an attempt to promote the image of the US as an international force which was determined to create its own empire, both in the cultural and economic realms this was clearly demonstrated by the fact that the athletes taking part were the epitome of the ideal American stereotype, which in turn steered away from Baron Pierre de Coubertin's vision of the Olympic Games as the cradle of internationalism (Freeman, 2012). Actually, several of the early Olympics have been described as events that were focused on showcasing the prominence of the countries' royal houses to foreign visitors across the international scene, with the 1896 Athens Olympics and the 1912 Stockholm Olympics featuring as illustrative examples (Mandell, 1984). In the same way, the Olympic Games of 1920, 1924 and 1928 held in Antwerp, Paris, and Amsterdam respectively, helped build the image of the games as international event with increased participation and audiences and with performance making the international headlines. At this point, interest in the games started to extend far beyond Europe and some of the rituals that are seen as an integral part of the ceremonies were introduced at this stage. For example, releasing doves to symbolise peace and lighting the Olympic flame started in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games; such rituals added to the international

excitement associated with the games and consolidated their reputation as an international event worthy of attention (Freeman, 2012). It can thus be argued that during these years one of the key goals of the games was for the host city to demonstrate to the world its ability to exceed and improve on previous Games; consequently, sportswashing does not appear to be a significant aspect at this stage, something that changed significantly with the 1936 Berlin Games hosted by Germany under the rule of Adolph Hitler.

These games ushered in the era of the Olympic Games as an international sporting event intertwined with politics and therefore fulfilling the characteristics of sportswashing. Early on, Hitler was rather reluctant to host the event, but he was soon swayed by his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels that the games had the potential to show the world the strength of the regime as well as the superiority of the German state and the Aryan race. The aim was to present to the rest of the world an image of a strong and unified Germany, prepared to claim its rightful place in the world order. Thus, the games presented the Nazi regime with a unique opportunity to overshadow previously held events in terms of architectural ingenuity, athletic prowess, or public support (Freeman, 2012). The sportswashing character of the event is depicted in the fact that antisemitic propaganda was either concealed or removed, especially in areas that would attract visitors; the regime feared an international boycott as well as international sanctions. Additionally, gypsies and other groups that were considered inferior were removed from areas in Berlin and placed in camps. These actions were accompanied by a comprehensive propaganda campaign by means of posters, film, and magazine to extensively glamorise the event (Senn, 1999). Interestingly, the president of the American Olympic Committee at the time did not see through this disguised attempt to exploit the Olympic Games as a political tool and did not take into account advice to boycott them. Eventually, several issues with participation of ethnic groups that the Nazi regime rejected arose, and, despite the success of the Jesse Owens, the African American athlete, it was the German team that managed to win more medals than any other participants, effectively demonstrating to the world that the Germans were not only administratively capable but also respectable and peace-loving and that they had managed to outdo in terms of performance both the USA and the UK, which had been dominant in the sporting arena until then (Mandell, 1984).

Therefore, it can be argued that the Nazis under Adolf Hitler were able to use the 1936 Berlin Games as a ‘trampoline for their own political power’ (Boykoff, 2022, p. 334). A case in point was the Olympic Torch Relay, a special tradition devised by the Nazis to enable sportswashing during the games. More specifically, a flame which was lit in Greece was carried to the Berlin Olympic stadium where it ignited the Olympic cauldron, after travelling from ancient Olympia to Berlin carried by more than 3,000 runners. The relay was strongly supported by Joseph Goebbels and was given the seal of approval of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in May 1934; the event was a perfect example of propaganda, enabling the Nazi regime to portray German Aryans as the worthy heirs of those who created the Olympic Games: the ancient Greeks (Mandell, 1987). The extent of the propaganda potential of this event was immense, as the route from Olympia to Berlin traversed seven countries, thus spreading the word not only regarding the event itself, but also Nazi propaganda in central and southeastern Europe, both of which were areas of concrete geopolitical interest to Hitler (Boykoff, 2022). The culmination of this exercise in sportswashing was the final phase of the relay during which torchbearers were exclusively chosen to be blond and blue-eyed, perfect illustrations of the Aryan race and its superiority (Large, 2012).

It is also interesting to examine how the media portrayed the event. At times, US media coverage praised the organisation of the event, with the New York Times hailing Hitler as “the new Caesar of this era” who “was receiving the plaudits of a league far removed from politics, a league of peaceful sport to which he had become the proud host” (Birchall, 1936a, p. 1). Another article in the same newspaper bears the title ‘Olympics Leave Glow of Pride in the Reich’, further showcasing how effectively Hitler used sportswashing to promote his political agenda. The overall impression conveyed in the American press was that the 1936 Olympic games had made a positive contribution to international relations, with visitors from abroad leaving Germany with the impression that “this is a nation happy and prosperous almost beyond belief; that Hitler is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, political leaders in the world today, and that Germans themselves are a much maligned, hospitable, wholly peaceful people who deserve the best the world can give them.” (Birchall, 1936b, p. E5). As a result, there is strong evidence to indicate that the Games enabled the Nazi regime to promote their image as a country, which corresponds directly to what sportswashing entails.

Overall, the 1936 Olympics did not only improve Hitler's reputation abroad, but also domestically, which further highlights sportswashing elements. More specifically, Hitler's popularity seems to have reached a zenith in the summer of 1936, as he even managed to penetrate the working classes. This increased domestic support functioned as a springboard for Hitler's ensuing military actions, demonstrated by Hitler's increased aggression in the aftermath of the Olympic Games, with the Olympic stadium effectively being used for the development of new, war-related technology. Events that illustrate this increased aggression include the annexation of Austria in 1938, the Kristallnacht rampage in the same year, as well as the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, which eventually led to the outbreak of World War II (Welch, 1993). This sequence of events and its association with effective use of sportswashing highlights the adverse effects of the practice; these effects will be discussed more thoroughly in the next section of this chapter.

The Olympic Games that were hosted following World War II did not feature sportswashing elements as prominently as the Games that came to be known as the Nazi Olympics. However, in the 1960 Rome Olympics, the Italian government made sure to hold memorable events in venues that were culturally and historically meaningful in an attempt to outdo previous events and illustrate the country's prestige. Similarly, the 1964 Tokyo Games presented the Japanese government with an opportunity to present the country as being modern and efficient, thereby reintroducing it to the world following World War II (Freeman, 2012). Furthermore, an interesting example of sportswashing that did not yield the expected result is that of the 1972 Munich Games hosted by the government of West Germany in the midst of the Cold War. The main aim of the West German government was to organise an event that would not only effectively disassociate the new Germany from the Third Reich and the lasting legacy of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, but also forge an image of an affluent, forward-looking nation, in contrast to East Germany (Schiller, 2010). As a result, several new venues were constructed, accompanied by the required infrastructure for staging such an event; it was hoped that the 1972 Munich Games would become "hallmark by which all future Games would be compared in terms of efficiency, modernity, and ceremony" (Freeman, 2012, p. 1269). Sadly, the 1972 Munich Games came to be remembered principally for the attacks perpetrated by Palestinian gunmen on Israeli athletes, with the former exploiting this mega-event to serve their own political agenda. This case also

underscored the need for increased security awareness during such events for the first time. It is worth pointing out that following the 1936 Berlin Olympics there was a de-escalation of the use of sportswashing techniques by hosting states despite the fact that the Cold War was raging, making the use of propaganda tools an integral part of the geopolitical game.

Another interesting example of how the Olympic Games have been used to serve political agendas are the 1988 Seoul Games hosted by South Korea. When Seoul was awarded the rights to host the Olympic Games – making it the second Asian state after Tokyo in 1964 as well as the second developing state after Mexico in 1968 – the main objectives that the event was meant to serve included offering South Korea legitimisation as a world power, showcasing the country's recently acquired economic strength, affirming the legitimacy of the regime and establishing a global popular movement to exert pressure on the authoritarian North Korea with regard to its threatening stance in global affairs. In this sense, the games were being used as a soft power tool. However, the government of North Korea saw the Games as a sportswashing opportunity and demanded to host events that would enable it to showcase its prowess and prosperity to Olympic audiences. However, when the IOC offered North Korea five events, the latter contended that they would only take part if they were offered co-host status, a demand that was turned down by the IOC, which eventually led to the Games being boycotted by North Korea (Freeman, 2012). It can therefore be argued that an attempt was made by the North Korean government to use the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics as a sportswashing exercise, which however failed due to the stance of the IOC. The outcome in this case stands in stark contrast to the 1936 Berlin Olympics where Nazi propaganda was allowed to run rampant.

It was in the “concrete historical conjuncture” of the 21st century that sportswashing came into its own (Hall, 2016, p.16). Within this context, one of the most widely discussed events is that of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics hosted by China. Initially, it had been suggested that Taiwan would attempt to claim its independence taking advantage of preparations for the games that would undermine power centralisation for the Chinese government. Although it was believed that “Beijing would be reluctant to use force for fear of [Olympic] boycotts and damage to China's improving reputation” (Freeman, 2012, p. 1269), the suggestions proved unfounded. In the same way, Tibetan separatists and their supporters attempted to attract media

attention by means of protest banners along the Great Wall and extensive media campaigns as well as requesting that a Tibetan team be permitted to compete in the Games. However, these actions had a very limited impact as the Chinese government appeared to have the support of its people and was able to use propaganda, censorship, and the media effectively, ultimately diminishing the impressions created by protesters (Yardley, 2008). As a result, when the 2008 Beijing Games came to an end, the overall impression conveyed was that China had organised the Games in an exemplary way that would effectively set new, higher standards for future hosts (Freeman, 2012). Therefore, through effective use of sportswashing tactics, China had managed to enhance its reputation at least to a certain degree allowing predominantly positive impressions to linger on in the collective conscience of the Olympic world.

Similarly, Boykoff (2022) sees the 2008 Beijing Games as a prominent example of how sportswashing is applied in practice. As early as the bidding phase of the games, it became clear that China viewed the event not only as an opportunity to boost its economy, but also “enhance social conditions, including education, health and human rights” (Hadad, 2008). Nonetheless, this enhancement never really took place; on the contrary, as pointed out by Human Rights Watch, the 2008 Beijing Games marked a negative turning point, after which state repression was intensified. It has also been emphasised that the IOC, despite China’s failure to keep earlier promises and reduce human rights violations, went ahead with choosing China to host the 2008 Olympic games (Boykoff, 2022). In particular, activists complained about intensification of aggression towards ethnic minorities such as the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang Province, Tibetans and even democracy activists operating in Hong Kong (Byler, 2021). Selecting China, the perpetrator of severe human rights abuses, as the host of the Olympic Games has been regarded as an open clash with the fundamental principles of Olympism as set out in the Olympic Charter, with the respect for universally recognised ethical principles standing out as one of the ideals that the actions of the Chinese government went against. Interestingly, despite allegations of sportswashing, Beijing was selected to host the 2022 Olympic Games as well, in the midst of serious accusations of human rights violations. This has led Saucedo (2021) to characterise the IOC as one of the biggest enablers of sportswashing, reluctant to defend Olympic values and essentially “providing brutal dictators a place of honor in box seats”. The accusation stems from the reaction of IOC Chair Thomas Bach who refused to take a stance on a number of

human rights issues within China by arguing that “if we were to start taking political sides, this would be the politicisation of the Olympic Games, and this, I would think further, could be the end of the Olympic Games.” (Saucedo, 2021). This statement highlights the added difficulty of eliminating sportswashing from mega events – especially the Olympic Games – given that open political intervention is frowned upon and does not tally with the spirit of the Games themselves.

As has already been pointed out, sportswashing does not only occur in non-democratic or authoritarian states. Boykoff (2022) explores the 2010 Vancouver Games as a prime example of sportswashing perpetrated by a democratic state, linking it to the context of colonialism. From a theoretical standpoint, colonialism is not merely about the identities, heritage, and values of the settlers, but rather about genocide and access to resources (Liboiron, 2021). Thus, sports washers within the colonial context are those who instill a specific form of domination by promoting land relations based on good will and good deeds, while at the same time using representational force (Mattern, 2005). Thus, mega-events present unique opportunities to portray the trespassing of indigenous territory in a positive light instead of the dissolution of an equal partnership (Boykoff, 2022). More specifically, in the 2010 Vancouver Games, the role of indigenous peoples was emphasised to an unprecedented extent. As the Games took place on unceded Coast Salish Land, protests regarding indigenous rights and settler colonialism became a focal point, with the slogan ‘No Olympics on stolen native land’ featuring prominently (Boykoff, 2022). As early as 2004, the Four Host First Nations organisation was formed, comprising four first Nations from British Columbia and aiming to assist in the staging of the Games.

Boykoff (2022) characterises the recognition – for the first time – of indigenous peoples as official host partners. This is based on the fact that although these nations that opted for participating in the planning and execution process of the Games benefited financially, there were still 80 out of the 203 indigenous groups that refused to participate. This is a particularly interesting statistic especially if one considers the financial gains accompanying participation and the dominant pro-Olympic discourse communicated by the media at the time (Pemberton, 2010). The characterisation as sportswashing is also justified by the fact that despite increased publicity, the Games did not actually translate into substantial job creation for the indigenous population. Statistically, although the percentage of indigenous workers increased slightly between

2007 and 2009 from previous levels in 2006-2007 (going up from 1.2% to 3%), there was a subsequent decrease to 1% in 2009-2010 (Muller, 2017). The Games have thus been seen as an attempt to initiate sponsorship schemes focusing on indigenous culture, art, and education with the aim of disguising the adverse impact of corporate initiatives by means of friendly slogans and donations. In the case of the Vancouver Olympics, sportswashing took the form of cultural appropriation consolidating the colonists' dominance over the indigenous populace (O'Bonsawin, 2006). Such allegations of sportswashing however did not prevent the Canadian Olympic Committee from registering the Four Host First Nations as Canada's partners in the bid for the 2030 Winter Olympics to be held in Vancouver, further reinforcing the view the Canadian authorities are using the Olympic Games as a vehicle for communicating the impression to domestic and international audiences that Canada is a 'multicultural idyll', effectively veering attention away from the ongoing debate regarding the legal status of indigenous land (Kaste, 2010). The analysis above underscores the implementation of sportswashing practices outside the context of authoritarianism and raises interesting questions both regarding the nature of the practice and the ways in which it might be mitigated.

Lastly, the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics in Russia constitute a more recent example of sportswashing. This mega event allowed Russian President Vladimir Putin to veer attention away from laws prosecuting gay, lesbian, transgender, queer and bisexual individuals, an action that had generated negative media coverage worldwide (Boykoff and Yasuoka, 2014). Scholars have argued that although in terms of image enhancement to external audiences the 2104 Sochi Games may be considered a failure, it is important to understand that the organisers and Putin's regime did not entirely focus on the country's international image; rather they targeted their efforts towards creating the right messages for their domestic audience, prompting the population to demonstrate loyalty to their country as well as a desire to consolidate national strength and solidarity especially against international opponents that appeared to be cultivating and disseminating anti-Russian attitudes (Boykoff, 2022).

Müller (2014) and Alekseyeva (2014) provide illuminating statistics that showcase sportswashing in action. Although the 2014 Sochi Games were to cost more than all previously held Winter Olympics, and although only 43% of Russians believed the Games would bring financial benefits, around 62% of Russians were still proud of

hosting the event. This highlights how “domestic messaging, wrapped inside the wider sportswashing project” (Boykoff, 2022, p. 693) had a substantial impact on domestic audiences. It should also be pointed out that in terms of domestic audiences the Games involved more than monetary gains: the Sochi Games were used to build the country’s image and to produce and spread symbolic support for the government as well as the holistic political system (Alekseyeva, 2014). Thus, hosting the Olympic Games enabled the regime to cement a sense of Russianness among the population, effectively dispelling notions that had been around since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In other words, hosting this mega event assisted the work of those in Russia who were promoting a “unified, stable sense of Russianness constructed from selected portions of pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian cultural history” (Wolfe, 2016, p. 483). In fact, in the time period before the Games, state-controlled media disseminated positive, supportive narratives aiming to inspire patriotic pride, while during the actual Games a shift in the attitudes of Russians was observed: even those who previously held pro-Western attitudes reacted negatively to what they viewed as biased coverage on the part of the Western press, calling it ‘evil-reveling’ (Wolfe, 2016, p. 488). Consequently, the Olympic Games transformed into a unifying event for the country that felt under attack by the Western world, and national pride acted as a fusing force that prompted the nation to unify, further showcasing the effects of sportswashing on domestic audiences.

However, it has also been argued that Russia failed to fully exploit the potential offered by the 2014 Sochi Games to exercise soft power (Nye, 2014). This argument can only be regarded as valid if one considers impact on foreign audiences alone and disregards what happened domestically. As Grix and Kramavera (2017) point out, the main objective of the Games was to influence domestic audiences rather than use soft power or sportswashing to change prevailing views about Russia held by international actors. In this sense, the twofold purpose of hosting the Olympics is identified as both fostering patriotism and acting as a unifying cultural symbol within the country. In fact, the 2014 Sochi Games were a part of a more holistic modernisation programme for Russia, a fact often overlooked by Western scholars. This is further corroborated by statistics indicating that Putin’s popularity soared in the wake of the event, reaching an unprecedented approval rating of approximately 86% by May of the same year (Grix and Kramavera, 2017). Interestingly, this rise in popularity has been partly attributed to Russia’s invasion of the Crimean Peninsula after the Olympic Games had ended and

before the Paralympics began (Grix and Kramavera, 2017), which is seen by Boykoff (2022) as evidence that mega events such as the Olympic Games can ‘soften up the political terrain for war’ among domestic audiences. This in turn leads to the observation that events such as military action can be interpreted differently by international and domestic audiences: for the former, the Russian invasion constituted a dangerous act perpetrated by a renegade state; for the latter, it was a symbol of national strength and inability of foreign actors to prevent Russia from rising. Therefore, the messages conveyed coincided with those ingrained in the 2014 Sochi Games discussed earlier, underscoring how sportswashing in the domestic context should be distinguished from the theoretical framework of soft power and its analysis (Boykoff, 2022).

ii.iii Non-Olympic Sportswashing

The previous section has presented and analysed instances of sportswashing associated with the Olympic Games; however, sportswashing is not only restricted to the Olympics, and the term was coined in connection with the European Games rather than the Olympics as has been previously mentioned. Although discussing all cases of sportswashing outside the Olympic context is beyond the scope of this paper, the ensuing section will focus on specific cases that highlight different aspects of sportswashing that need to be taken into account when identifying the practice’s legacies and putting forward ways of mitigating the phenomenon.

The most prominent example featuring in related literature is the event that has essentially made ‘sportswashing’ a well-known term: the 2022 Qatar World Cup. When Qatar was awarded host status in 2010, there were already allegations that there had been extensive corruption of the process through vote buying (Bensinger, 2018). It must be noted that Qatar is a constitutional monarchy and that its ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, yields complete power over the state, which translates into restriction of freedom of expression, criminalisation of same-sex relationships and severe prohibitions against labour organising (Boykoff, 2022). Interestingly, one of the country’s senior officials for the World Cup publicly stated that although members of the LGBTQ community would be welcomed at the event, their flags might be removed

for their own protection (Harris, 2022). More importantly, it was reported that the World Cup stadium construction had claimed the lives of more than 6,500 migrant workers and that others underwent appalling labour abuses for which they were never compensated (Pattison and McIntyre, 2021). Although these ethical violations went against the spirit of the game and the event itself, the reaction of the then FIFA President Gianni Infantino illustrated a different viewpoint from that of human rights organisations as he argued that even though conditions were harsh, the migrant workers were in fact given dignity and pride through employment (Harris, 2022). The same attitude was conveyed by the words of the President of the African Football Confederation during attendance of the World Economic Forum: “Every time I am in Qatar, I see thousands of people from all over the world having the privilege and the excitement of employment and taking money home with the building of the stadiums, the building of hotels. It has huge benefits for our people in the Middle East as well as worldwide” (Kunti, 2022). Such remarks highlight how human rights violations can be presented in a different light, not only by those involved in sportswashing practices, but also by diverse stakeholders in the sports world.

Looking at Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup, it can be said that it constitutes a paradigm case of sportswashing. Arguably, there is grave injustice in the state, in terms of human rights and labour rights abuses, which inflicts reputational damage on the regime. Such moral violations could effectively create a certain view of Qatar around the world, by means of headlines (Fruh et al., 2023). However, sportswashing practices can create a different narrative: through the acquisition of Paris Saint-Germain FC in 2011, Qatar has succeeded in making the headlines with a different narrative, that of the dominant force in French football with high-profile signings and unprecedented results. In the same way, by Hosting the World Cup, Qatar can benefit from a close association with a very popular event that will downplay the importance of other aspects, especially negative ones, in the eyes of worldwide audiences (Fruh et al, 2023). Therefore, the hosting of this mega event presents an opportunity to relegate information about ethical violations and injustices to the background, while simultaneously focusing attention on the successful – even impressive – organisation of the event, thereby improving the regime’s reputation. On a more holistic level, through owning hosting Qatar aims to use its newly achieved reputation as a prominent member of the international football community to create an image of a state that is beyond reproach despite certain internal

issues. This is why the Qatar case encompasses all aspects of sportswashing as posited by Fruh et al. (2023), namely a state that is guilty of serious and widespread moral violations, the sportswashing agent is a state or a regime and, lastly, sports are strategically exploited to alleviate the negative effects of reputational damage for the state or regime in question.

However, an interesting aspect of the 2022 Qatar World Cup is how it underscores the fact that sportswashing is not always successful in terms of how the host country is viewed internationally. As Al Thani's sportswashing attempts increased scrutiny, the effects have been twofold: first, there has been increased awareness of the kafala labour system, which effectively transforms the country's migrant sponsorship system into forced labour; second, FIFA corruption has come under close scrutiny (Boykoff, 2022). As a result of increased pressure from human rights groups, Qatar has implemented amendments of the kafala system since September 2020, thus being the first state in the Gulf to grant migrant workers the right to change jobs without employer permission, ending the latter's absolute control over them. Additionally, a minimum wage was introduced. Although Qatar is still a long way from meeting the requirements of a fair labour system especially with regard to migrant workers, the two changes mentioned above could be seen as the result of pressures generated by the World Cup and the attention it brought with it. In other words, this mega event gave rise to positive externalities that did not tally with the initial sportswashing intentions of the host country's regime.

The 1978 FIFA World Cup held in Argentina is often quoted as an example of authoritarian sportswashing in extant literature. At the time, the country was under a military dictatorship following a coup led by Lieutenant General Jorge Videla who displaced the government of Isabel Peron, who initially had enjoyed popular support as it was believed that it would relieve the country of political instability and increased crime rates (Sheinin, 2012). However, the new regime soon launched the so-called 'Dirty War' to exterminate domestic enemies, which led to serious human rights violations and extermination of any opposition to Videla's rule (Lewis, 2002). Argentina had already won the bid to host the World Cup in 1964 – prior to the coup – but the severe human rights violations and the prominence they had gained over global media led to widespread opposition to the World Cup being held there, with calls for a boycott being made by various human rights organisations including Amnesty

International (Hersey, 2018). This opposition forced the Argentinian junta to reconsider some of its action and to even bring in a US public relations consulting firm to enable it to host the event successfully without incurring additional reputational damage (Goldblatt, 2006). Interestingly, Henry Kissinger, the US Secretary of State at the time was brought on board to enhance the legitimacy of the whole affair (McDonnell, 2008). These actions constitute examples of sportswashing as indicated by the framework presented earlier and highly resemble the practices employed by Qatar more than forty years later. However, the most blatant attempts at sportswashing took place during the competition itself, with the Argentinian team making it to the final following a game against Peru, which has come to be regarded as one of the most controversial games in the history of football (Hersey, 2018). Argentina went on to win the final against the Netherlands as well, which led to celebrations within the country that gave rise to a wave of patriotism, legitimising the regime's power and reinforcing their commitment to the 'Dirty War' (McDonnell, 2008). In other words, winning the World Cup for the first time had prompted domestic audiences to shift their attention from human rights violations occurring within the country by prioritising national pride generated by victory.

What differentiates the case of Argentina from that of Qatar is that the bid was not made with sportswashing in mind, as the autocratic regime took power after the bid for the event had been won (Fruh et al., 2023). It is true that the commitment undertaken to host the World Cup presented the regime with the challenge of showing the world that Argentina was a country where kidnappings and bombings were a daily occurrence, but rather that the new regime had brought stability and safety (Wilson, 2016). Thus, although the regime did not initiate the sportswash, it exploited it as a sportswashing opportunity in order to "create a sense of national euphoria and togetherness" (Wilson, 2016, pp. 194) in an effort to downplay the inhumane treatment of dissidents. Other FIFA World Cups that have been associated with sportswashing practices include the 2018 World Cup held in Russia which acted as a distracting factor from the way in which Russia's ruler Vladimir Putin used forced labour for the construction of the stadiums as well as from violations of LGBTQ rights (Ellis, 2020).

As has already been mentioned, sportswashing does not only involve the hosting of events, but can also be perpetrated through ownership and sponsorship, a practice that has emerged as a prominent tool in the hands of Gulf states. However, football is not

the only sport where this practice is being used. Saudi Arabia constitutes an illuminating example, as since 2016 Mohammed bin Salman, the country's Crown Prince, established a Sports Development Fund with the aim of privatising football clubs, promoting new sports events and generating approximately 40,000 employment positions within the country (Zidan, 2019). Since its introduction the fund has enabled Saudi Arabia to host several motorsport events, wrestling and boxing tournaments and even a Professional Golf Association (PGA) European Tour event (Chen and Doran, 2022). Moreover, the fund is engaged in sponsoring the LIV golf International, a recently formed golf series, the Saudi Arabian regime pledging 400 million dollars for the initiation of the league (Mullin, 2022). Crucially, the PGA suspended 17 of its members because of their participation in LIV Golf London event, while DP World Tour also went ahead to both ban and fine a number of famous golf players for participating in the same event (Zak, 2022). The reason behind these actions was that LIV London had used unacceptable means to attract players, with the Chief Executive of LIV Golf London, famous Hall of Fame golfer Greg Norman, being characterised as an "ambassador of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing scheme" (Chen and Doran, 2022, p. 2). Indeed, LIV Golf International has made a name for being aggressive in their recruitment of members using vast amounts of money for recruiting and threatening the existing contract system (Stricklin, 2022). However, it should also be pointed out that the aforementioned suspensions have been criticised for unfairly targeting players who decided to compete in a rival league offering better prizes, ultimately becoming the scapegoat for the sportswashing actions of the Saudi Arabian regime (Zak, 2022). This case highlights the thin line between effectively dealing with sportswashing and actively interfering with the establishment of healthy competition, an issue that will be more extensively discussed in later sections of this paper.

iii. The Legacy of Sportswashing

This section will explore the positive and negative legacies of sportswashing not only for states engaging in such practices, but also for diverse actors. The section begins by defining the concept of legacy and providing a more general theoretical framework

before going on to present the positive and negative legacies of mega events and sportswashing as highlighted in existing literature.

iii.i The Concept of Legacy: A Theoretical Framework

Firstly, the construct of legacy needs to be defined so that what is encompassed by the term is clarified. Preuss (2007, p. 211) defines legacy by means of a legacy cube as follows: “irrespective of the time of production and space, legacy is all planned and unplanned, positive and negative, tangible and intangible structures created for and by a sport event that remain longer than the event itself”. The same scholar has gone on to create a framework for the definition of legacy of sports events which includes six fundamental elements or dimensions (Preuss, 2015). Firstly, legacy lasts longer than the event itself and the impacts directly associated with it. More specifically, it is posited that legacies can also emerge from structures completed prior to the event, but the majority of legacies is derived from factors that follow the event. Secondly, a legacy creates new opportunities from an initial impact and has the potential to develop its own dynamics over time due to environmental changes. Thirdly, a legacy comprises changes that yield positive outcomes for certain stakeholders and negative ones for others, while it may be tangible or intangible, and material or non-material. Additionally, a legacy is a priori limited to a well-defined space, a city, but some of the impacts may well extend beyond the confines of the city to encompass other areas of the country or even the whole country; such effects may be either individual and local or international and global. Lastly, according to Preuss (2015), a legacy often comes about indirectly from the event, while a negative legacy indicates that outcomes may be unintentional. This definitional framework allows the concept of legacy to be distinguished from others, such as impact or leveraging.

Legacies, either positive or negative, can have a wide range of effects that can be grouped under acceleration, political and financial categories. For example, positive acceleration effects include faster urban development as well as earlier use of productive structure, while negative effects encompass policy shifts owing to time pressure, increased expenses, and hasty planning. Similarly, positive political effects include facilitation of consensus on projects and overall city development, with main

negative effect being that the opposition is under pressure to acquiesce to avoid endangering the project. Lastly, a key positive financial effect is the attraction of external resources, mainly in the form of tourism, while, on the negative side, the required investments to be done within a rigid time framework may lead to incurring debt (Preuss, 2015).

An important aspect of legacy which merits further discussion is the different effects that it can have on diverse stakeholders, which has often led to disagreement among scholars regarding mega sporting events. The 2012 London Olympics are an illuminating example of this point, with the middle class enjoying the positive legacy of the event and the poorer population coming out on the losing side. As Cooper (2012) observes, hosting the Olympics meant that over 11,000 new properties would be built on the site of the Olympic Park within the two decades following the Games. Although, the ensuing gentrification of East London meant that rent prices became more affordable for middle-class incomes due to increased construction activity, the less well-off population were effectively faced with the need to relocate as increased rents pushed them farther away (Bernstock, 2014). Additionally, for wealthy Londoners or those not involved in renting, the Games had no legacy, as these members of the population were not impacted by the changes in house prices. The example discussed above highlights the different perspectives from which legacies of mega sporting events need to be evaluated before valid conclusions can be reached; this is particularly true of sportswashing, where there is potentially a large gap between legacy effects for different stakeholders, making it even more difficult to engage in a discussion regarding the legacies of this practice.

Apart from the different stakeholders involved, legacies also need to be distinguished in terms of time and duration, with the former referring to when the legacy occurs. When specific structures are created long before the staging of the event, thereby changing location factors prior to it, Preuss (2015) uses the term ‘pregnancy effect’ to discuss a legacy associated with the preparation of the event. Another term used within the same theoretical framework is that of a ‘latent legacy’ referring to the activation of a legacy when other circumstances arise. For instance, although the knowledge regarding how to bid is acquired prior to the hosting of an event, this knowledge will only become a legacy if the city or state bids for another event later on. In other words, given that events create opportunities, until an opportunity is put to use, the legacy that

develops from it remains latent (Barget and Gouguet, 2007). Additionally, the duration of legacy differs among stakeholders, with some legacies being of short duration – such as political reputation – and others lasting much longer, especially when associated with infrastructure. It should also be noted that a positive legacy can become negative and vice versa in the course of time (Preuss, 2015). An appropriate example to illustrate the point is a stadium which may initially yield a positive economic legacy through tourist visits or the staging of non-athletic events, before ultimately becoming a financial burden on the state, thereby yielding negative legacy.

From a holistic standpoint, the legacy of an event should aim at improving the quality of life of diverse stakeholders. However, it cannot be denied that mega events stand to benefit certain segments of the population more than others as location factor changes do not benefit all citizens equally (Preuss, 2015). It is therefore vital that the central organising authority – typically the government – takes into account the need to accommodate diverse stakeholders' needs when developing their event strategy. When seen in this light, sportswashing emerges as a practice which has the satisfaction of specific objectives in mind, thereby increasing the likelihood of a negative legacy being generated among stakeholders that are not affected by these objectives.

iii.ii Impact of Hosting Mega Events

Before discussing the impact of sportswashing as such, it is important to examine the effects that hosting mega events can have on a state. At this point, a distinction needs to be made between regular sports events and mega events. According to Muller (2015), the latter are characterised by four dimensions, namely visitor attractiveness, mediated reach, cost and transformative impact. Regarding the first dimension, mega events are treated as tourist attractions making the number of visitors a basic feature, while mediated reach revolves around event coverage by the media. Thirdly, the dimension of cost is associated with the input side, considering the sums of money spent on the event which affects diverse stakeholders. Lastly, transformative impact refers to the urban transformation generated by hosting the event, which is directly linked to investments made and their impact on host cities and states. Based on these dimensions, Kobierecki and Stozek (2020) undertook a quantitative analysis to explore the extent

to which staging mega sporting events enables states to enhance international visibility and familiarity. Using fluctuations in the number of Google searches for host cities and states between 2004 and 2018, the researchers attempted to establish whether the host cities/states attract increased attention, which is directly linked to attempts to change national image. The connection between a country's image and sportswashing makes it interesting to explore how mega events can contribute to such changes in order to establish the ultimate effects of sportswashing. Kobierecki and Stozek (2020) used the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cups held between 2004 and 2018 as the mega events on which their quantitative research was based, given that these events fulfilled the four dimensions proposed by Muller (2015).

In general, although there are several methods for doing so, staging mega events is regarded as one of the most characteristic ways of using sports to increase international visibility and familiarity, thereby improving the host country's international image. Although attempts have been made to measure this effect for specific events, using commercial value and potential economic benefits as key indicators, there is still no clear picture regarding the scale of this impact (Kobierecki and Stozek, 2020). For instance, Palmer (2013) had investigated the instrumentalisation of sports by means of mega events in particular, since these events, despite having limited duration, have far-reaching social repercussions in terms of providing entertainment and generating emotions. Similarly, Frawley (2017) has found that such events are actually shaped by external factors such as global media coverage, further highlighting how they can go a long way towards facilitating sportswashing practices. This had been identified as a key reason why mega events are often hosted by countries that have something to prove (Widomski, 2016), as they represent a rare opportunity to project in a specific way the country's desired image in the global media (Dembek and Wloch, 2014). The research carried out by Kobierecki and Stozek (2020) corroborates previous research from a quantitative perspective, showcasing that hosting mega sports events increases both international visibility and familiarity for the host state. For instance, hosting the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004 led to a significant increase in the volume of the search index, as did hosting the FIFA World Cup in Germany. Therefore, this increased visibility and familiarity can potentially be used to enhance a state's international image in many respects. However, the risks encompassed in hosting such events in terms of

generating reputational damage if there are organisational or other problems cannot be ignored (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015).

iii.iii Aspects of Sportswashing Legacies

Having established that mega sporting events have the power to substantially affect a state's image, we will now move on to discussing positive and negative outcomes of sportswashing as illustrated in existing literature. Although, the term sportswashing carries predominantly negative connotations, certain scholars have identified potentially positive outcomes. However, as the terms positive and negative are dependent on the perspective of the stakeholder affected, the analysis below will not engage in such concrete characterisations but will attempt to examine each outcome holistically.

One of the key effects of sportswashing is the fact that it allows “state leaders to cut through the noise of global information society to disseminate a series of widely heard, reputation-enhancing messages over a sustained period” (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2018, p. 1146). As pointed out by Fruh et al (2023), this can be simple, for instance, by eliminating unfavourable search results by generating increased volume. In other words, if first page search results for ‘Qatar’ only yield results related to the World Cup, then human rights violations, which might appear on later pages, will not attract as much attention. Thus, sportswashing can distract attention away from specific moral violations, eventually prompting larger numbers of people to make positive associations between the sporting event in question and the sportswashing agent.

Similarly, sportswashing can lead to the minimisation of the moral violation, for instance by means of awarding it a less prominent position than the event itself. This is distinguished from distracting attention in the sense that, in this case, it is not that fewer people will be aware of the moral violation, but that the informational context will make the issue appear less important, extensive, or urgent. Additionally, sportswashing may lead to normalisation of the ethical violation, whereby certain audiences stop treating the moral violation as such and view it as something acceptable (Fruh et al., 2023). This can be done in two distinct ways. Firstly, as sporting events are commonly associated with a compelling array of powerful emotions and a sense of commitment, alignment

with the host of the given event can enable sportswashing practices to enact a halo effect (Kahneman, 2011). Indeed, this positive association of the sportswashing agent with the event can be so powerful that it substantially impacts the conclusions drawn regarding the moral violation in question. In fact, it has been observed that when individuals are honoured or celebrated publicly, this can prompt people to view other aspects of their behaviour as positive too (Archer and Matheson, 2019). Secondly, sporting events and sports in general often constitute ways of establishing and defining community. Thus, the fact that sports function as an arena for people to engage and interact with each other, shape a sense of community and share feelings of loyalty, makes it all the easier for sportswashing effects to proliferate. Fruh et al (2023, p. 104) refer to this as ‘community infiltration’, whereby engagement in sport or sporting events allows the sportswashing agent to gain acceptance as a beneficent member of this community. This in turn brings on benefits of tribalism, whereby members of the same community defend, justify, and excuse the behaviour of the sportswashers, treating them as their own. A recent case in point is the incident during which supporters of Chelsea Football Club chanted the name of the Russian oligarch who owned their team during applause in support of Ukraine (Descalsota, 2022).

The fact that sportswashing distracts from, normalises or minimises ethical violations through sports not only corrupts sporting values, but also makes event participants complicit in these wrongful deeds. The concept of complicity is not directly related to the actions of sports fans or audiences of mega events, in the sense that they are not of the given political system perpetrating human rights abuses or other ethically questionable practices. However, the complicity of fans and audiences lies in the fact that participants in sports effectively aid sportswashing through their participation, which in turn allows the perpetuation of injustices (Fruh et al., 2023). This is seen in the aforementioned incident with Chelsea F.C. supporters, whose chanting indicated that while the owner was empowered to benefit from positive association with the club, the club itself was disassociated from the moral violations of the owner. This duality essentially makes the manager complicit in the injustice perpetrated by the owner (Fruh et al., 2023). In a similar way, fans can be rendered complicit by spending money on tickets or television rights, the proceeds from which allow sportswashers to perpetuate their practices, while the role of fans in shaping club identity also enables sportswashers to benefit through association (Wojtowicz, 2021).

Furthermore, sportswashing results in the corruption of the values ingrained in sports culture, as sports and competitions have long histories that can function as the focal points for a community as well as a source of communal identity (Edgar, 2021). Therefore, through sportswashing, an event that carries profound athletic or social value is transformed into a mere tool of laundering a state's blemished reputation. More specifically, as Fruh et al (2023) contend, sportswashing may prompt fans to forget the importance of communal values and solely focus on victory by whatever means, ultimately distorting the meaning of fandom and replacing community values with a blind desire for victory. Moreover, the elements of complicity discussed earlier also enable the corruption of sporting heritage, in the sense that fans become embroiled in discussions and debates that do not concern the game.

Similarly to the above negative legacies of sportswashing, Ganji (2023) considers information manipulation a serious issue and identifies three concrete ways in which sportswashing engages in such practices. Firstly, sports can displace negative content by presenting an alternative narrative. Based on the landmark study on selection bias by sociologists Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge, Ganji (2023) observes that selection bias shows preference for stories about sports, making it far more likely that the public will disregard other stories. This effect of sportswashing tallies with Fruh et al.'s (2023) discussion of how sportswashing distracts attention from ethical violations by creating a kind of smoke screen that does not allow the public to see anything but the sporting side of the event. For instance, researchers found that during the 2018 World Cup, for which Uruguay's team had qualified, reporting of political events in the country was reduced, and more extensive coverage was given to the mega event (Dodel et al., 2019).

Secondly, sports can rebut negative content by reinforcing alternative perspectives, effectively resembling "an influencer industry teeming with PR professionals" (Ganji, 2023, p. 6). In this way, hosting a mega event is akin to getting a character reference by the public, which through sportswashing can affect what audiences might pay attention to. An appropriate example to illustrate this point is the 1978 World Cup hosted by Argentina, which at the time was under a military dictatorship. Joao Havelange, FIFA's president, supplied a set of references downplaying concerns about the political instability prevalent within the host nation and reassuring the world that there was nothing to fear (Ganji, 2023). Havelange's testimony illustrates exactly how

sportswashing impacts what audiences are likely to hear. Lastly, sports can demean negative content by ushering in alternative emotions. By exploiting the immersive atmosphere created during sporting events, sportswashing manages to replace criticism with pride over victory. This is particularly true in the case of football, which makes this point similar to the point made about Chelsea FC fans earlier in this chapter.

Overall, there is extensive evidence in the literature that highlights how sportswashing, although it may yield positive outcomes for those engaged in it, has broader negative repercussions both for communities and sports themselves; in a sense, sportswashing threatens democratic institutions by imposing a narrative on audiences and by deflecting attention from ethical violations and injustices. What is equally important however is the fact that it puts a political or propagandistic spin on athletic events, thereby distorting their character and polluting the spirit that these events are meant to have and communicate.

iv. Prevention and Mitigation

As has been established in the previous chapter of this dissertation, sportswashing has grave consequences, thereby making it imperative that it is stopped or at least mitigated. Although there is a general consensus of opinion regarding the need to prevent such practices, there is a disagreement among scholars in terms of where the responsibility lies: with fans and participants or with organisations and governments? The difficulty in providing a concrete answer to this dilemma lies in the fact that sportswashing cannot be dealt with via a legal framework as it falls within the realm of diplomacy where lines between the legal and ethical dimensions are often blurred. For example, many agents involved in sports fail to associate sportswashing with their participation, thereby denying complicity in the sense that football fans have no control over ownership (Fruh at al., 2023). However, it is also argued that, although sports fans or event visitors may find themselves being complicit without bearing immediate responsibility, their response can either reinforce their complicity or devise ways of resisting it (Knowles, 2021). This is better illustrated through the hypothetical example of a white man born into a white supremacist society: arguably, the man has no control over being born in that society; however, if he chooses to acquiesce with racist beliefs and enjoy the

benefits that they offer, he is rendered more complicit than if he resists racism and strives to minimise the extent of his complicity (Knowles, 2021). In much the same way, even when those involved in sports find themselves complicit through no responsibility of their own, the way they choose to respond either augments or reduces complicity.

Fruh et al (2023) identify two broad strategies that enable diverse stakeholders in sports to resist sportswashing: ending participation and transforming participation. The former can take on a variety of forms including fans boycotting a team or event, players refusing to participate or even journalists refusing to provide media coverage of events where sportswashing is taking place. Such actions may defuse complicity and mitigate sportswashing, especially if participation is reduced through well-organised, collective efforts. In practical terms, a recent example of such resistance to complicity can provide the pathway. When Scottish football club Raith Rovers signed striker David Goodwillie in 2022, they failed to take into account the fact that he had been found guilty of rape in 2017. The powerful response by sponsors, fans, staff members and even Scottish politicians essentially forced the team to end Goodwillie's contact (Brooks, 2022). Although, this example does not constitute a sportswashing incident, it still provides evidence of how sports actors and diverse stakeholders can use ending participation as a powerful tool to resist injustice or ethical violations. This analysis is corroborated within the theoretical framework of structural injustice which asserts that the social role of an individual can both contribute to and constitute injustice (Zheng, 2018). With regard to sportswashing, it would be beneficial if those engaged in sports considered their social roles with a view to resisting sportswashing practices. In a similar way, the Danish men's football team contemplated boycotting the 2022 Qatar FIFA World Cup – a prime sample of sportswashing at play (Fruh et al., 2023). Although eventually the team participated, deciding that putting pressure on the host state would be more effective, this is still an illuminating example of how resistance to sportswashing in the form of ending participation does not only diminish complicity but also preserves sporting heritage by resisting corruption.

However, it should also be pointed out that this form of resistance may be feasible on a theoretical level but bears significant costs practically. For instance, it means that fans will be giving up something of immense value to them, while other stakeholders, such as athletes and managers among others, will be potentially jeopardising their entire

careers (Tarver, 2017). In other words, it is relatively easy for sportswashers to use several aspects of stakeholders' involvement in sports – including sense of community and financial gain – in order to effectively lure in audiences and exploit the profound attachment that stakeholders have with these values. One might also argue that the strategy of ending participation to protect sporting heritage from sportswashing may ultimately be regarded as abandoning the said heritage instead of protecting it. Thus, this resistance method is both practically difficult to implement and morally challenging to justify.

A second strategy put forward by Fruh et al. (2023) to combat complicity in sportswashing is that of transforming participation. An example to contextualise this strategy is the 1968 Olympics during which African American sprinters Jimmie Smith and John Carlos staged a protest when receiving their medals: they stood without shoes and in black socks to symbolise poverty and also rose their fists wearing black gloves to represent Black unity and power (Tower, 2018). Through this act of protest the two athletes effectively transformed their participation, making a stand against injustice and using their social roles to raise awareness. Nonetheless, their actions were not seen as commendable by all and they faced recrimination for this protest, which could have been avoided if this had been a collective action rather than two individuals acting on their own. Fruh et al. (2023) contend that if all stakeholders make a point of speaking repeatedly about social issues or moral violations that are being sportswashed, then the distraction effect discussed by scholars might be reduced, as might minimisation and normalisation. Additionally, Knowles (2021) suggests that even those who cannot publicly transform their participation, there are alternative ways of reducing complicity, either by externally discussing and condemning injustice or by internally acknowledging that injustices or ethical violations indeed take place. This entails actively resisting the urge to be lured in by the benefits offered by sportswashers, especially in the case of football clubs, where the transformation of an average team into Champions League contenders may prove particularly tempting.

However, other scholars focus on the responsibility of enablers and gatekeepers, with the former referring to governing bodies, transnational corporations, national federations as well as local franchises, and the latter comprising national legislators and regulators (Ganji, 2023). An analogy is established between sportswashing as a form of reputation laundering and money laundering, as in both cases enablers act as

intermediary licit organisations which allow illicit actors to deposit illegally acquired funds. The difference with money-laundering however lies in the fact that rather than laundering currency, sportswashers are essentially laundering their reputation with a view to accruing soft perks. Therefore, Ganji (2023) sees enablers as willing accomplices to such practices, as they use sportswashers as alternative sources of finance; that being said, this practice is not risk-free as has been demonstrated by events discussed earlier that have exposed FIFA both to geopolitical and legal risks.

What enablers can do to mitigate sportswashing and safeguard democratic processes is to embed human rights standards in their organisations, such as public commitment to respecting human rights, measures to deal with issues associated with their organisations and establishing systems to monitor and publicise pertinent knowledge. For instance, both FIFA and the EPL adopted human rights standards in 2017 and 2022 respectively, a move which can be further adopted by similar organisations. Admittedly, such standards cannot be regarded as foolproof, since as it is still possible that opportunistic stakeholders will continue to conduct business with sportswashers; still, the existence of concrete standards can go a long way towards clarifying the price to be paid for enabling sportswashing as well as facilitate civil society groups in their struggle to identify and prevent such actions.

As far as gatekeepers are concerned, Ganji (2023, p. 13) sees their responsibility as providing the organisation of “the home front against foreign influence”. In other words, the policies of legislators and regulators determine which foreign actors can be introduced to the sector either by hosting and broadcasting events or by sponsoring and owning properties such as football clubs. It needs to be pointed out however that this is a challenging equation as, if the policies are too lenient, they might result in increased sportswashing incidents, while if they are too tight, there will be substantial loss of foreign investment, resulting in negative financial outcomes. A case in point is the dilemma faced by legislators in the UK when Russian influence cast a heavy shadow over the Chelsea FC community. Thus, gatekeepers need to discover the optimum trade-off between solvency and the preservation of democratic processes. This can be rendered feasible by enlarging the pool of stakeholders involved in the decision-making process of each sector or event. Arguably, in the case of football clubs, supporters are entitled to have say in their club’s governance, which would in turn increase complicity levels. An interesting example of such policies are not only the member-owned

paradigms of Swedish and German football, but also the recommendations launched by the “Fan Led Review of Football Governance” in 2021, which proposes to allow fans to veto key club decisions and to set up an independent organisation to scrutinise the actions of club owners and directors (Ganji, 2023). This initiative, which might seem too farfetched at first, takes into account the unique properties of the sports sector, where there is significant critical infrastructure which allows democratic societies to remain vibrant and influential.

More specifically, the introduction of the fan ownership model in Germany’s Bundesliga in 1998 has created the necessary framework to prevent or at least mitigate sportswashing within football clubs (O’Kelly, 2022). The 50+1 rule as this framework has come to be known, enables fans to determine the club’s direction and impact the decision-making process, thereby allowing them to participate in the league in a capacity that transcends the simple consumer (Irving, 2020). By requiring teams to own the majority of voting rights in order to be permitted participation in the Bundesliga, this ruling essentially ensures that the club’s supporters remain in control, thus protecting the team from the influence of foreign actors and making the provision of community social value a key objective instead of profit maximisation (Honigstein, 2009). Admittedly, the 50+1 rule has been criticised for breaching EU competition rules and there are still clubs that have managed to become exempt due to lengthy past ownership by corporations or individuals; such clubs include VfL Wolfsburg, owned by Volkswagen, and Bayer 04 Leverkusen, owned by Bayer (Oltermann, 2014). All the same, in terms of sportswashing, the 50+1 rule provides an interesting example of the ways in which legislators or regulators can ensure protection of sporting organisations from foreign actors. Recently, there has been an increase in calls for such ownership models especially following the failure of the European Super League which highlighted the chasm between fans and team owners (O’Kelly, 2022). A similar model is also in operation in Sweden, which exemplifies how, despite the expected resistance from actors in English football, such a model might become more acceptable in the future, especially since concerns over sportswashing practices perpetrated through club ownership have attracted significant attention lately.

Alternatively, American sporting bodies and organisations, while distinctly different from European models, they can still offer some helpful lessons with regard to how they are run (van Bottenburg, 2003). One of the most prominent examples is the ‘salary

cap', which monitors spending, improves competitiveness and also offers protection to the clubs and their players, since the union represents them and their interests (O'Kelly, 2022). The salary cap is judged as particularly effective in terms of ensuring a level playing field across the game and reducing talent hoarding, which can be directly associated with sportswashing and club ownership by those engaged in it. Furthermore, the equitable distribution of revenue among league member is an element of American sport that might contribute to the battle against sportswashing. This practice leads to a fairer league, which in turn becomes more competitive, thereby attracting larger numbers of fans. In sharp contrast to this, the weighting system for revenue distribution used in Europe depends on broadcasting reach and audience combined with final league positions, a practice that essentially creates a vicious circle with elite clubs dominating the environment and acting as appealing prospects for sportswashers due to the increased attention and profitability (O'Kelly, 2022). Therefore, by creating a more equitable revenue system, sportswashing via club ownership may be largely curtailed.

Lastly, the current fit and proper ownership tests which are used by the English Premier League need to be significantly improved to correspond to today's challenges. The main issue associated with the three currently available tests is that they are very limited in their scope, making it very easy for sportswashers to pass with flying colours (Fruh, Wojtowicz and Archer, 2022). In fact, only three individuals have failed the test so far, which cannot be regarded as surprising as the focus is on having a criminal record and no information is disclosed unless candidates fail (Hamil and Walters, 2013). In light of the discussion of sportswashing undertaken earlier, it is easy to see why these tests pose no obstacle to sportswashers, which suggests that they should be replaced by gatekeepers in order to incorporate a code of conduct, lead to the establishment of an ethics committee and impose strict sanctions in case of rule-breaking (O'Kelly, 2022).

However, it can also be argued that this type of intervention could be generated either by Western nations safeguarding their own ability to exercise soft power through sports or by investors who might perceive other club owners as a potential financial threat. Thus, Fruh, Wojtowicz, and Archer (2022) go as far as to suggest that sporting bodies and organisations should operate on the assumption that any individual, state or corporation interested in buying a team or hosting an event is engaged in sportswashing. As a result, rebutting sportswashing allegations would become an integral part of the bid, either demonstrating convincingly that no such issues exist or that if they do, they

will be tackled effectively. As sports is an increasingly competitive environment where owning and hosting are thought of as privileges, it follows that the introduction of criteria to proactively counter sportswashing can ultimately reduce the scope of the practice (Fruh, Wojtowicz, and Archer, 2022). In a similar vein, Saucedo (2021) argues that in order for sportswashing to be prevented effectively the sports industry should refrain from conducting business with authoritarian regimes to avoid enabling them to exploit either the team's or organisation's prestige from being used to disguise human rights violations or ethical discrepancies of any kind. It is also pointed out that when engaging in interaction with regimes that potentially engage in sportswashing, the sports industry should consult the United Nations' Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights to ensure that there is adherence as well as to ensure consistency by respecting human rights to the same extent as domestically (Saucedo, 2021). Overall, there are significant changes that can be implemented on the part of governing bodies and organisations to ensure that sportswashing is not allowed to run rampant especially through the acquisition and sponsorship of teams.

V. Conclusion

In light of the analysis undertaken above, it becomes clear that sportswashing is a phenomenon that is not only increasing in prevalence in the 21st century, with 2022 being called ‘the year of the sportswash’ (Zidan, 2022), but also penetrating many different realms of sports. The two main forms of sportswashing comprise hosting sporting events – preferably mega events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup - and owning or sponsoring athletic organisations, with football clubs emerging as often used paradigms. However, a discussion of sportswashing cannot be undertaken effectively before a consensus is reached regarding which actions fall under this definition. Following a discussion of related terms, this paper concludes that Boykoff’s (2022) typology offers the most complete and amenable definition of sportswashing especially since it does not restrict such practices to authoritarian regimes and acknowledges that the democratic states can also engage in sportswashing albeit with different objectives in mind. To restrict the discussion of the phenomenon to specific regime types would be to adopt a western-centred approach, accepting that democracies are infallible. Moreover, an overlap between soft power and sportswashing is observed, which can be overcome if it is stipulated that sportswashing involves elements of reputation enhancement in light of questionable or inequitable moral practices, such as human rights violations. The overview of sportswashing incidents both in the Olympic and the more general context reveals that the practice has existed since antiquity and has been especially prevalent in the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup due to the international appeal of such mega events. Regarding the legacies of sportswashing, it is established that there are different perspectives from which these can be examined, as highlighted by the 2021 London Olympics. However, in terms of ethical violations and injustices, there is consensus among scholars that sportswashing can adversely affect the dissemination of information about ethical violations perpetrated by sportswashers, as well as distract, minimise or normalise such practices through the prioritisation of alternative narratives. Given the gravity of these legacies, the need to prevent or, at the very least, mitigate sportswashing in the context of mega events emerges as imperative. This can be achieved through the adoption of models that have proved effective in sports such as football, for instance in Germany or Sweden. However, it is important to highlight the role that both enablers and gatekeepers are

required to play in this collective effort as well as the role of supporters or participants, whose complicity levels are of the utmost importance. Although ending or transforming participation are not without risk or consequences, they can still go a long way towards hindering sportswashing attempts. That said, the key responsibility lies with official bodies of organisers, legislators and regulators who need to take into account the fact that in the 21st century it is rather utopic to cling to the notion that ‘sports and politics don’t mix’, when it has been repeatedly shown that they do. By incorporating sportswashing awareness into a new regulatory framework, global sports actors can contribute significantly to the mitigation of the phenomenon.

The systematic literature review conducted for this paper attempted to cover the existing literature on the topic of sportswashing, its effects and ways of prevention or mitigation. Nevertheless, the study presents certain limitations. Firstly, the review is based only on articles written in English although the database search yielded results in other languages as well. Thus, the discussion of sportswashing would have been more complete, had such articles been included as well. Secondly, the data used for this review is purely qualitative due to the nature of the topic. Absence of concrete quantitative data regarding the effects of sportswashing detracts from the quality of the conclusions reached. Future research could focus more thoroughly on the distinction between soft power and sportswashing, as well as, on specific ways of mitigating the phenomenon within the context of the Olympic Games, as most scholarly work to date has revolved around other events, primarily football related.

VI. References

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