**Table 1.** Definitions of sportswashing

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| **Authors** | **Year** | **Discipline/Field** | **Definition of sportswashing** | **Examples** |
| Amnesty International | 2021 | Human rights NGO | ‘Sportswashing is where states guilty of human rights abuses invest heavily in sports clubs and events in order to rehabilitate their reputations. Owning a sports club or hosting an event creates positive publicity and can help airbrush over human rights violations in the country.’ (online) | Current A league champions Melbourne City are owned by City Football Group, the sports investment company of Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a member of the royal family that rules Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates.’ (online) |
| Chadwick | 2022 | Sport and Geopolitical economy | ‘A means by which a country can deflect audiences’ attention away from less favourable perceptions of a country via a programme of investment in sport.’ (p.696) | The British government uses sport to drive diplomatic and trade relationships, using football as the basis for constructing a British national brand.’ (pp.696-7) |
| Boykoff | 2022 | Sociology of sport | ‘I define sportswashing as a phenomenon whereby political leaders use sports to appear important or legitimate on the world stage while stoking nationalism and deflecting attention from chronic social problems and human-rights woes on the home front. Sportswashers use mega-events to try to foment national prestige and to convey economic or political advancement.’ (p.342) | ‘Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti used the scourge of homelessness to sportswash, stating that ‘I’m confident that by the time the Olympics come, we can end homelessness on the streets of LA’.’ (p.343) |
| Fruh *et al.* | 2023 | Philosophy | ‘A practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club […] to subvert the way that others attend to a moral violation for which the sportswashing agent is responsible.’ (p.101) | ‘While the term itself is relatively new, ‘sportswashing’ captures a phenomenon that arguably extends back at least as far as the 1934 World Cup, hosted by Mussolini’s fascist Italy, and the 1936 Olympics, hosted by Hitler’s Nazi Germany, and runs through intervening years in cases such as the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, just two years after a military coup installed a brutal dictatorship there.’ (p.103) |
| Grix *et al.* | 2023 | Politics | ‘The concept of ‘sportswashing’ serves as a short-hand way of criticising non-democratic regimes for using investment in sport, sports clubs, and sports events to detract from illiberal practices in their home countries (…). We have conceptualised ‘sportswashing’ as a process involving an inherently bidirectional phenomenon which benefits both the illiberal regimes and the Western sports brands and organisations that collaborate in it.’ | The second case study investigates the Saudi state’s sports investment strategy, with a deeper analysis of their partnership with World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), as this highlights how the ‘sportswashing’ arrangement can be manipulated to benefit both the nation state and their active partners.’ |
| Haththouwa | 2023 | Press | ‘Sportswashing is a term used to describe countries utilising sports events to polish their reputation, leverage power in the global community and legitimise wrongdoings - giving awareness to possible human rights violations including the repression of press, genocide and laws that restrict women and LGBTQ people.’ (online) | ‘The winter Olympics in Beijing, boxing matches and LIV GOLF tournament in Saudi Arabia, and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar.’ (online) |
| Skey | 2023 | Sociology of sport | ‘Sportswashing is currently a popular neologism that has been used to write about particular types of regimes who are either seeking to bolster or manage their reputations on the international stage. [It] focuses on acts of consociation rather than deception. It is designed to build positive associations with a state/country rather than simply conceal.’ (p.760) | In January 2022, it was announced in the UK media that a Saudi-backed consortium had bought the English Premier League football club, Newcastle United.’ (p.749) |
| Bergkvist and Skeiseid | 2024 | Advertising | Sportswashing is defined as the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information.’ (p.1) | ‘… the 2022 FIFA Men’s World Cup in Qatar, which is seen as a prime example of sportswashing.’ (p.3) |
| Gerschewski *et al.* | 2024 | Politics | Sportswashing ‘can be described as state actors’ activities, often in cooperation with sporting organizations, with the goal of not just hiding information and deceiving, but fostering positive associations with the respective state in the minds of people. It is as a pejorative term, criticizing these activities, often used for the efforts of non-democratic states.’ (p.2) | ‘In the case of Qatar, pundits coined the term sportswashing, referring to information manipulation by host nations, such as replacing or countering negative content, to improve their image abroad.’ (p.2) |
| Kearns *et al*. | 2024 | Sociology of sport | ‘Sportswashing is a tactic of morally questionable political regimes to distort attention from their ethical violations through leverage of emotional associations and media coverage that come with sport.’ | ‘In 2008, MCFC [English football club Manchester City] were bought by the Abu Dhabi United Group - a private equity group operated by Abu Dhabi royalty and UAE politicians. The Group has invested approximately £1.5 billion in that time … and the club have won seven premier league titles, eight domestic cup trophies and the 2023 UEFA Champions League; achievements that would have been deemed impossible before the takeover. This has aroused criticism for not only financially distorting club football, but also as ‘one of football’s most brazen attempts to ‘sportswash’ a country’s deeply tarnished image.’ (Human Rights Watch) |

**Table 2.** Illustrative examples of strategies for making the best of sportswashing situations

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| **Strategy** | **Illustrations**  |
| Leveraging media coverage of the sportswashed event to raise awareness of the cause | ‘Huge investments increase the profile of sports and sportswashing can backfire by drawing unwanted negative attention to a country’s human rights record.’ (Irwin, 2022)‘It’s a global-scale expression of the Streisand Effect: the thing they’re doing to cover their crimes is actually broadcasting them to everyone.’ (McManus, 2022)‘Sportswashing … can lead to heightened awareness of the problematic actions of authoritarian regimes. For example, when the Abu Dhabi United Group took over ownership of Manchester City Football Club in 2008, fans became aware of the poor human rights record of the United Arab Emirates, where the group is backed by the royal family. … By making sportswashing so ubiquitous, these sportswashers have actually increased awareness of how they infringe upon human rights and suffocate aspirations for democracy.’ (Morgenbesser and Filo, 2024) |
| Transforming key stakeholders of the sportswashed event into cause promoters | Naomi Osaka wrote during the Black Lives Matter movement that ‘Today … athletes have platforms that are larger and more visible than ever before. The way I see it, that also means that we have a greater responsibility to speak up. … There is no legal obligation for athletes to care about sportswashing, nor should there be. However, if Osaka is right, then those with a greater platform have a larger social responsibility to speak out on human rights issues. Much recent media attention has been on athletes’ willingness to compromise moral ground to gain financially.’ (Irwin, 2022)‘Sometimes fans push back. Newcastle United supporters formed a group (NUFC Against Sportswashing), and have repeatedly protested the club’s ties to the Saudi government. Since 2020, German club Bayern Munich’s fans have repeatedly unveiled banners critical of the club’s dealings with Qatar at matches.’ (Morgenbesser and Filo, 2024) |
| Leveraging the sportswashing experience to raise future standards | ‘Even before that invasion [of Ukraine], FIFA had begun to show signs that it recognized the need to address sportswashing criticism of its award of consecutive World Cup finals to Russia and Qatar. The year before the Moscow tournament, FIFA announced a formal commitment to internationally recognized human rights standards, and pledged to take human rights into account when choosing future host nations.’ (Temko, 2022)‘Regarding Saudi Arabia as the possible host of the 2034 World Cup, Dennis Horak, Canada’s former ambassador to Saudi Arabia stated: ‘They saw .... the attention that was placed on the treatment of migrant workers in Qatar, and they know there’s going to be criticism. I think they’re hopeful that the reform efforts ... will be well along the road, and that there’ll be a lot of good stories that will sort of blunt some of those [criticisms].’’ (Goodyear, 2023) |