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Sportswashing: exploiting sports to clean the dirty laundry

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ABSTRACT

Sportswashing became a current media topic in the run-up to and during the Qatar 2022 Men's FIFA World Cup. However, there is no consensus on what the term means, and there is limited research on the effects of sportswashing. This paper systematically develops a clear and concise definition of sportswashing that demarcates it from other marketing concepts. Sportswashing is defined as *the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information*. Furthermore, the paper draws on advertising theory to develop two frameworks that aim to explain how sportswashing works from the sportswasher's and individual's perspectives. The paper demonstrates that advertising theory is an important lens for further exploration of sportswashing and proposes an exciting agenda for further research.

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Sportswashing; definition; leveraged marketing communications (LMC)

Introduction

Potentates from the international governing bodies of different sports like to claim that sports and politics don't mix (Lenskyj 2020). However, the debate surrounding recent mega-events such as the 2018 Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) Men's World Cup in Russia, the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, and the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar shows that sports are inextricably intertwined with politics. Some have even argued that the claim that sports and politics don't mix is 'an impossibly naïve and simplistic view' (Chadwick 2022, p. 691).

In sports and politics, 'sportswashing' has recently gained prominence. The term sportswashing was first used in 2015 and has since spread like wildfire, with mentions in English-language media skyrocketing (Skey 2023). A Google Trends search, which shows the relative number of Google searches, found that searches for 'sportswashing' were almost nonexistent until 2019, after which searches started to increase sharply, with a peak in 2022 during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar (Figure 1). Given that autocratic regimes host a significant and growing number of international sports events (Lenskyj 2020; Scharpf, Gläßel, and Edwards 2023), general and academic interest in sportswashing is on an upward trajectory.

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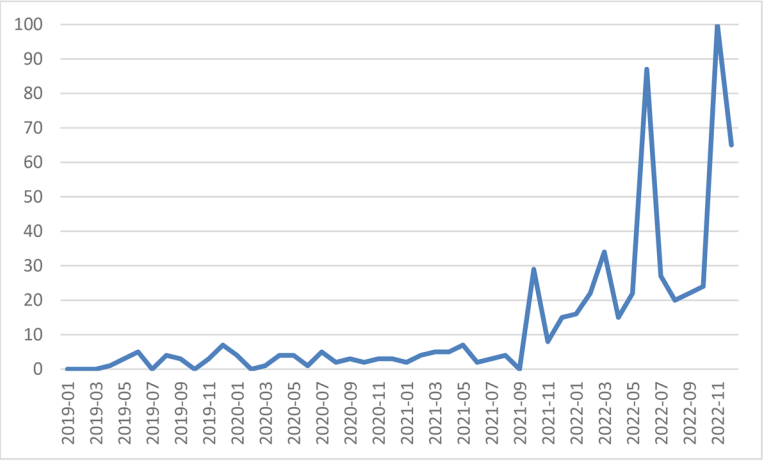

Figure 1. Google Trends: Search index for "sportwashing".

There has been scant interest in sportswashing in marketing and advertising research. Research on sportswashing has mainly taken place in disciplines outside or on the periphery of marketing, such as sociology (e.g. Boykoff 2022), international politics (e.g. Kobierecki and Strożek 2021), and sport management (e.g. Chadwick 2022). An all-text search of leading marketing (*JAMS*, *JCP*, *JCR*, *JM*, *JMR)* and advertising journals (*IJA*, *JA*, *JAR*) found no articles with 'sportswashing,' 'sports washing,' or 'sport washing.'

Sportswashing is a marketing communications strategy with specific communication objectives (Kobierecki and Strożek 2021), and advertising theory and research can illuminate how sportswashing works and what effects it might have. For example, on the individual level, sportswashing works similarly to leveraged marketing communications (LMC; Bergkvist and Taylor 2016) by associating a sports property (e.g. a sports mega-event) with another entity (e.g. a country) to increase awareness and transfer positive associations from the former to the latter. Sportswashing is thus relevant for advertising research in a similar way as greenwashing (Hartmann et al. 2023), rainbow-washing (Wulf et al. 2022), and other forms of 'washing.'

Sportswashing currently finds itself in Stage 1, the *Emergence*, of construct evolution, demonstrating its relevance while lacking substantial development in subsequent stages (Bergkvist and Eisend 2021). This paper aims to advance sportswashing to Stage 2, *Conceptualization*, by proposing a definition and theoretical framework for the construct. To achieve this, we provide an overview of sportswashing examples and define the construct in terms relevant to a marketing context. We then use advertising theory to outline the workings of sportswashing and its potential effects, considering the perspectives of the sportswasher and targeted individual. These theoretical perspectives collectively contribute to setting an agenda for future research on sportswashing.

Examples and types of sportswashing

The term sportswashing is mainly used concerning sports mega-events organized by autocratic states aiming to improve their image abroad (Kobierecki and Strożek 2021;

Skey 2023). One recent example is the 2022 FIFA Men's World Cup in Qatar, which is seen as a prime example of sportswashing. However, while the sportswashing discourse has focused on Eastern autocratic regimes rather than Western democratic countries (Skey 2023), some scholars argue that sportswashing is also relevant for democratic nations (Boykoff 2022; Kobierecki and Strożek 2021; Lenskyj 2020). Moreover, not only states but also corporations, individuals, and other entities engage in sportswashing aiming to improve their image (Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023). Also, smaller sports events can be targets for sportswashing (Millington et al. 2019) as well as other actions, such as purchasing a sports club (Chadwick 2022). There are also examples of actions identified as sportswashing directed at domestic rather than international target audiences, such as the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Manzenreiter 2010) and the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics (Boykoff 2022). To illustrate the breadth of what is perceived as sportswashing, Table 1 shows examples of events and activities mentioned in the media as instances of sportswashing.

The examples in Table 1 show that the entity involved in sportswashing can be a geographic location, a corporation, or an individual. The leveraged sports property can be an event, club, or marketing activity. Thus, sportswashing is a multi-faceted phenomenon present in a wide array of situations and contexts. Moreover, some sportswashing activities overlap with marketing activities: Sponsorships are a frequently used marketing communications strategy (Cornwell and Kwon 2020; Mazodier and Merunka 2012), and sports 'ambassadors' are akin to celebrity endorsers (Bergkvist and Zhou 2016), strategies also used in cases of alleged sportswashing. To further

Table 1. Examples of instances mentioned in the media as sportswashing.

Entity	Sport Property				
	Host Mega-Event	Host Event	Purchase Sports Club	Sponsorship	Sports "Ambassador"
State/Region/City	2018 FIFA World Cup (Russia)[a]	PGA Tour (China)[a]	Paris Saint Germain (Qatar)[c]	2023 FIFA Women's World Cup (Saudi Arabia)[d]	Lionel Messi (Saudi Arabia)[e]
Corporation	n.a.	Aramco Team Series (Aramco)[f]	FC Zenit Saint Petersburg (Gazprom)[g]	Paris Saint Germain (Qatar Airways)[h]	n.a.
Individual	n.a.	2022 LIV Golf Tour (Donald Trump)[i]	Chelsea Football Club (Roman Abramovich)[j]	n.a.	n.a.

[a]https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/14/opinion/world-cup-qatar-sportswashing.html.
[b]https://www.bostonherald.com/2022/03/07/graham-the-pga-tours-sportswashing-problem-in-china/.
[c]https://www.theguardian.com/football/2019/feb/15/sportswashing-europes-biggest-clubs-champions-league-owners-sponsors-uefa.
[d]https://news.sky.com/story/fifa-criticised-by-womens-world-cup-hosts-over-potential-sportswashing-saudi-arabia-sponsorship-deal-12800614.
[e]https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/16/messi-business-how-sportswashing-could-land-saudi-arabia-the-2030-world-cup.
[f]https://www.golfwrx.com/706442/money-is-power-let-pro-and-vocal-sportswashing-critic-explains-decision-to-play-in-saudi/.
[g]https://www.thefourthfloor.co.uk/sport/the-sportswashing-of-corruption.
[h]https://www.dw.com/en/messi-psg-qatar-ffp-sportswashing-and-geopolitics-quo-vadis-football/a-58839479.
[i]https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/jun/06/saudi-liv-pga-tour-divisions-within-golf.
[j]https://www.cambridge.org/core/blog/2022/09/14/preventing-another-abramovich-let-the-beautiful-game-remain-free-from-sportswashing/.

complicate matters, in some cases of alleged sportswashing, the entity formally engaging with the sport acts as a proxy for another entity. For example, the Olympic games, officially hosted by cities, are national concerns supported by and involving national governments in multiple ways (Næss 2020), and individuals and corporations, particularly from China and Russia, have engaged in sports activities on behalf of their nations' governments (Chadwick 2022).

Sportswashing definition

Sportswashing is at the Emergence stage of construct evolution (Bergkvist and Eisend 2021), and some formal definitions have been proposed (Table 2). As expected, the definitions could be more consistent and have some limitations. The definitions vary concerning the entity performing the sportswashing ('political leaders,' 'country,' 'authoritarian regimes,' 'authoritarian state,' 'individuals, groups, corporations, or governments,' or not specified) and whether the objective is to deflect attention, improve a reputation, or both. The limitations include the use of ambiguous and vague terms (e.g. 'important or legitimate,' 'usually,' 'clean up'), a lack of parsimony (e.g. 'chronic social problems'), and specifying relationships between the construct and its antecedents or consequences (e.g. 'a tarnished moral reputation acquired through being a perpetrator of injustice') (see an overview of definition limitations in Bergkvist and Eisend 2023).

A workable sportswashing definition should be broad enough to include the examples of sportswashing in the previous section but specific enough to distinguish nefarious from respectable activities (e.g. acquiring a football team to distract from human rights abuse is distinct from acquiring a football team as an investment). Moreover, the definition should not overspecify the entity (e.g. requiring that the entity is a state) and leave room for a wide range of current and future actors.

Table 2. Definitions of sportswashing.

Source	Definition
Boykoff (2022, p. 342)	"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"
Chadwick (2022, p. 696)	"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"
Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz (2023, p. 2)	"a practice of using an association with sport, usually through hosting an event or owning a club (such as Paris Saint-Germain, owned by a subsidiary of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund), to improve a tarnished moral reputation acquired through being a perpetrator of injustice"
Kobierecki and Strożek (2021, p. 51)	"the use of sports events to clean up an image of a country, which can be tarnished as a result of for example poor human rights record"
Lenskyj (2020, p. 51)	"attempts on the part of authoritarian regimes to improve their tarnished global reputations through sport"
Næss (2020, p. 975)	"when an authoritarian state utilises a sporting event as a symbol of progress in order to gain international acclaim while hiding the negative consequences of it"
Wikipedia (2023)	"the practice of individuals, groups, corporations, or governments using sports to improve reputations tarnished by wrongdoing."

Moreover, the definition should reflect that sportswashing aims to distract from negative information about the entity (e.g. systematic human rights abuses), that it is a deliberate, purposeful activity undertaken by the actor, and that it involves leveraging a sports property. Also, the definition should not include ambiguous and vague terms or causal relationships and should be parsimonious (Bergkvist and Eisend 2023).

Against this background, we propose the following definition: *Sportswashing is the deliberate attempt by an entity to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information*.

This definition meets the criteria of a workable definition. *First*, the key terms are unambiguous. The words deliberate, attempt, entity, and counteract have a single meaning in American and British English (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.(a)). The words exploit, information, and negative have multiple meanings. However, exploit has two meanings that both fit the intended meaning of the definition ('to use something in a way that helps you' and 'to use someone or something unfairly for your own advantage;' Cambridge Dictionary n.d.(b)). Information has three overlapping meanings, referring to facts, news, details, and knowledge (Cambridge Dictionary n.d.(c)). Thus, the meaning of information should be unambiguous in the definition. The intended meaning of negative ('bad or harmful') should be clear from the context, as the other meanings of negative would be illogical (e.g. 'not expecting good things' or 'of the type of electrical charge that is carried by electrons;' Cambridge Dictionary n.d.(d)).

Second, the definition demarcates between nefarious and respectable activities by specifying that sportswashing aims to counteract negative information, which rules out other motives, such as investing. However, the definition does not entirely demarcate sportswashing from some other concepts. Sportswashing can be considered a form of propaganda, which has been defined as 'the *deliberate* attempt to persuade people to think and behave *in a desired way*' (Taylor 2003, p. 6), although there are many instances of propaganda that are not sportswashing. Similarly, in some cases, sportswashing will overlap with nation branding (i.e. 'applying branding and marketing communications techniques to promote a nation's image'; Fan 2006, p. 6), but the overlap is not complete, and there will be cases of nation branding that are not sportswashing, and vice versa. Moreover, the definition does not rule out that marketing communication strategies such as sponsorships and celebrity endorsements, in some cases, also are sportswashing. The partial overlaps between sportswashing and other concepts do not limit the value of the concept. Many marketing concepts partly overlap with other concepts but are still studied in their own right (e.g. green advertising is a subset of advertising but is studied as a separate phenomenon).

Third, the actor and the information are not overspecified. Entity includes nations, corporations, and individuals and leaves the construct open for other types of actors in the future. Negative information includes information such as human rights violations but does not preclude other forms of negative information (e.g. environmental concerns). In addition, the definition encompasses sports properties without any limitations, thereby covering major sporting events like the FIFA World Cup and the Olympics and smaller events in specific sports and sports-related activities like club acquisitions and the naming of sports arenas. *Fourth*, arguably, the definition clearly articulates the essential properties of sports washing (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff 2016). Adequate definitions should pass the test of the rule of replacement

(Teas and Palan 1997), which (Hunt 2010, p. 60) states as 'a word or group of words (the definiens) is proposed to be truth-functionally equivalent to the word being defined (the definiendum).' Thus, the meaning of a sentence in which the word sportswashing is replaced with its definition should not change. We believe this to be true of the proposed definition.

Sportswashing from the sportswasher's perspective

Sports have many positive characteristics (Mazodier, Henderson, and Beck 2018), while sportswashing entities are associated with negative information. This imbalance makes sports properties attractive for strategic communications and suggests that sportswashing could effectively counteract negative information. Through sportswashing, sportswashers can achieve visibility and connection with the sports property, creating an opportunity to drown out negative information and create downstream effects such as awareness, positive associations, and a positive attitude. (From hereon, we will mostly refer to the entity as the sportswasher, although it may not always be clear to the target audience that the entity is a sportswasher.)

Counteracting negative information with sportswashing can be achieved in at least five ways (Figure 2). *First*, an overlooked effect of sportswashing is that it can create or reinforce awareness of the sportswasher, akin to brand awareness learning in LMC (Bergkvist and Taylor 2016). While this effect is of minor or no importance for well-known entities (e.g. China, Russia), it could have long-term positive outcomes for less-known entities (e.g. Qatar, Bahrain) since awareness is a precondition for learning associations and forming an attitude (Rossiter, Percy, and Bergkvist 2018). For example, Formula 1 fans who know that Bahrain is a Persian Gulf country are likelier to notice, learn and remember the country's tourism benefits than people unaware of Bahrein (Bergkvist and Taylor 2022).

Second, sportswashing can create associations with positive connotations with the sportswasher (Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023). This image transfer from the sports

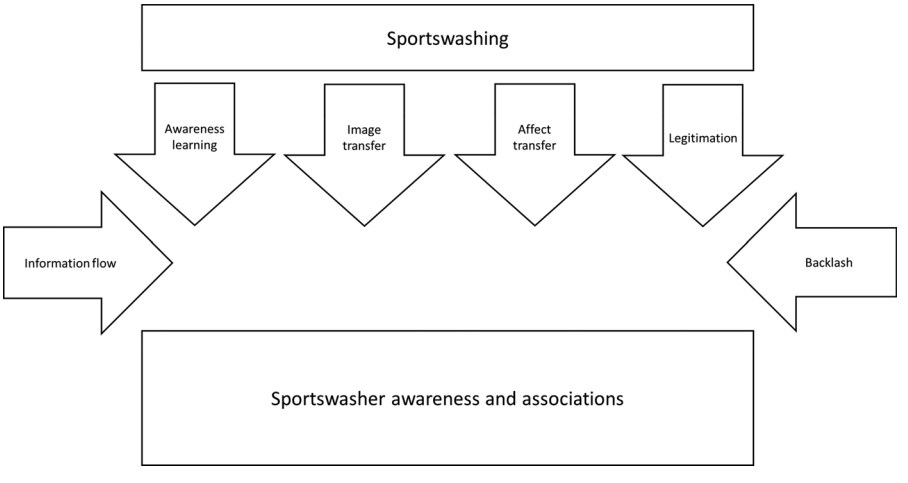

Figure 2. How sportswashing works from the sportswasher's perspective.

property works in the same way as for LMC; associations are transferred from the sports property to the sportswasher (Bergkvist and Taylor 2016). If associations with positive connotations are strengthened (e.g. through repetition), they might become more salient in people's memories over time than pre-existing associations with negative connotations (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2000).

Third, the association with a well-liked sports property might entail direct or indirect affect transfer to the sportswasher. In the realm of sportswashing, direct affect transfer is the transfer of liking for a sports property to the sportswasher, whereas indirect affect transfer results from attributing favorable sportswasher motives, mediated by the attitude towards the partnership between the sportswasher and the sports property (Bergkvist and Taylor 2016). Thus, sportswashing could lead to an improved attitude towards the sportswasher if the target audience strongly likes the sports property (a probable scenario given the widespread popularity of many sports) or attributes positive motives to the sportswasher.

Fourth, a further important effect of sportswashing is that it can increase the legitimacy of the sportswasher in the eyes of domestic and international audiences, particularly when organizing mega-events (Scharpf, Gläßel, and Edwards 2023). Prominent sports governing bodies like FIFA or the International Olympic Committee (IOC), once esteemed entities (though their reputation has been tarnished by corruption scandals; Jennings 2011), confer legitimacy upon host nations or cities through their selection (Søyland and Moriconi 2022). Moreover, when a host country organizes a major event, it showcases its ability to effectively manage a significant, sizable, and potentially challenging endeavor, thereby contributing to its overall legitimacy (Scharpf, Gläßel, and Edwards 2023).

Fifth, sports attract media and audience attention, particularly mega-events such as the Olympics and the FIFA world cup. This attention creates an information flow that can drown out the negative information the sportswasher wants to counteract. For example, hosting a sports mega-event means that internet searches likely will be dominated by sports-related results, drowning out human rights issues or other negative information (Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023). Sportswashing can also focus people's attention on the sports event rather than other issues, thereby deflecting attention away from negative information (Boykoff 2022; Chadwick 2022; Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023; Skey 2023). In statistical terms, the information flow moderates the preceding four sportswashing effects (as indicated in Figure 2).

Sportswashers risk backlash effects if the target audience perceives the involvement with the sports property as sportswashing and counter-react (Lenskyj 2020) or if the media attention to the sports property draws attention to the negative facts the sportswasher is trying to obscure (Scharpf, Gläßel, and Edwards 2023; Søyland and Moriconi 2022). Many people have become more aware of sportswashing, which increases the chance of a counter-reaction with adverse consequences for the sportswasher's image (Lenskyj 2020). There are examples of media focusing on stories inconvenient for the sportswasher (e.g. the media's attention to workers' conditions and rights before and during the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar; see, e.g. Zidan 2022). In the case of Visit Saudi's attempt to sponsor the Women's World Cup, the media attention caused a backlash that forced FIFA to reverse their decision about the sponsorship (Worden 2023). The backlash caused by counter-reaction and media

attention thus moderates the positive effects of sportswashing (Figure 2); more substantial backlash effects will lead to less positive or even negative effects for the sportswasher.

Sportswashing effects on the individual level

On the individual level, sportswashing should affect people in different ways and through different processes. Drawing on and extending Bergkvist and Taylor's (2016; Figure 1, p. 162) model of direct and indirect routes of LMC effects, we hypothesize that sportswashing can affect individuals through six routes (Figure 3). Four of these, awareness learning, indirect and direct affect transfer, and image transfer, are similar to the routes in the LMC model. However, for sportswashing we hypothesize two additional routes, backlash effects and association learning, and we emphasize that sportswashing involves exposure to information about the sports property *and* the sportswasher. For visual clarity, we have left out moderating effects from the model, but we discuss them below. We start by briefly discussing the routes also found in the LMC model (refer to Bergkvist and Taylor 2016, for a full discussion), followed by a discussion of the two routes unique to sportswashing.

Awareness learning refers to individuals' learning of the sportwashers name and/or other identifiers (e.g. a national flag, a company's logo) and connecting it to a category (e.g. geographic region, product category). Sportswashing promotes awareness learning through repetition of the entity name and its association with a category. For example, Formula 1 fans watching the Azerbaijan Grand Prix in Baku may learn that Azerbaijan is country a located by the Caspian sea. Awareness is a precondition for learning associations to an object and a primary communication objective (Rossiter, Percy, and Bergkvist 2018). Also, increased awareness may have positive effects on the evaluation of an object (e.g. Hoyer and Brown 1990, found a positive relationship between brand awareness and evaluation).

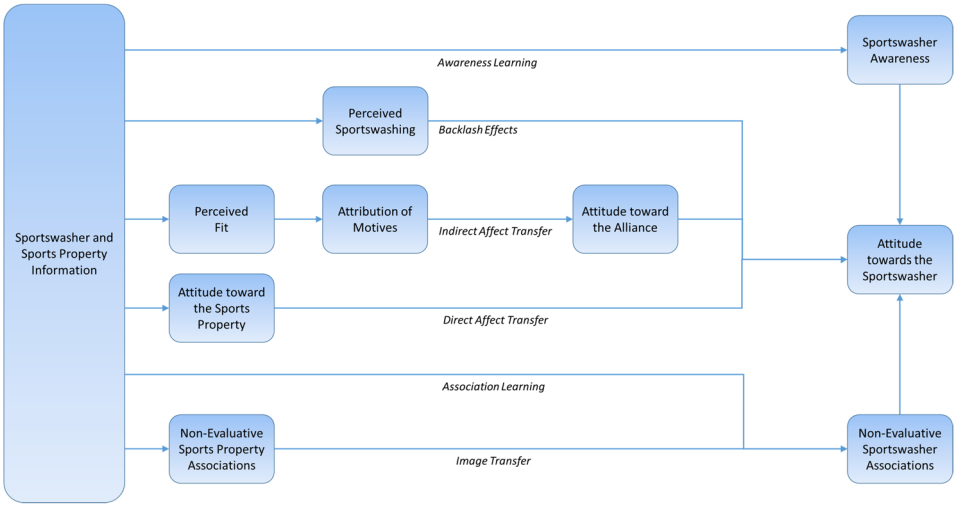

Figure 3. Hypothesized sportswashing effects on the individual level.

Indirect affect transfer results from the perceived fit between the sportswasher and the sports property, which leads to the attribution of (positive or negative) motives for the sportswasher's involvement (Simonin and Ruth 1998), which, in turn, affects the attitude toward the alliance between the sportswasher and the sports property. The attitude toward the alliance has a negative or positive effect on the attitude toward the sportswasher akin to the effect of attitude toward the ad on brand attitude (Bergkvist, Hjalmarson, and Mägi 2016). For example, Formula 1 fans may perceive that Azerbaijan, as an oil nation, has a good fit with a Formula 1 race, thereby attributing positive motives (e.g. supporting the sport) to the country. As a result they form a positive attitude towards the alliance, which, in turn, has a positive effect on the attitude towards Azerbaijan (if the perceived fit is low, the effect on attitude will be negative).

In direct affect transfer, liking of the sports property is transferred to the sportswasher through balance effects (Heider 1958), evaluative conditioning (De Houwer, Thomas, and Baeyens 2001), or adaptive learning (van Osselaer 2008). For example, Formula 1 fans, who presumably have a strong liking of the sport, transfer their liking of Formula 1 to Azerbaijan after being repeatedly exposed to the pairing of the two entities.

Image transfer is the transfer of non-evaluative associations from the sports property to the sportswasher through inference (Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley 2004) or spontaneous trait transference (Skowronski et al. 1998). For example, if Formula 1 fans associate the sport with speed, precision, and competitiveness, some or all of these associations may transfer to Azerbaijan.

Backlash effects and association learning, which are pathways unique to sportswashing, are essential for understanding the effects of this phenomenon. Backlash effects refers to the downstream consequences when individuals, based on the information they receive about the sportswasher and sports property, perceive an event or action as sportswashing. Assuming that sportwashing has negative connotations for many people, particularly in Western democracies (Lenskyj 2020), perceived sportswashing should have negative effects on the attitude towards the sportswasher. A possible mechanism for these negative effects would be infererence (see overview in Kardes, Posavac, and Cronley 2004). Individuals who perceive a situation as sportswashing will infer that the sportswasher has negative characteristics (e.g. lacking moral standards) and/or acts questionably (e.g. violates human rights). These inferences will have negative effects on the attitude towards the sportswasher. For example, some Formula 1 fans may read news reports asserting that Azerbaijan has used the Formula 1 race and other sports events for sportswashing (e.g. Saeed 2023). This information would shape their perception of the race accordingly and contribute to a negative attitude towards Azerbaijan.

Partnership with a sports property, particularly an event, offers many opportunities for sportswashers to provide imagery and information about themselves. The opening ceremonies of mega-events like the Olympics are broadcast globally and include footage of national icons, scenery, and other tourist attractions. News reporting frequently include background information about the host location and its people. This information flow offers rich opportunities for the audience to learn more about and form mental associations with the sportswasher. The mental associations, or beliefs, will have downstream effects for the attitude towards the sportwasher if they are

salient in the indidual's memory (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). The information, of course, could be positive or negative from the sportswashers perspective. For example, Formula 1 fans could learn that Azerbaijan has an interesting history, beautiful scenery, and fascinating tourist attractions. They could also learn that Azerbaijan is an autocracy, has a poor environmental record, and very poor acceptance of the LGBT+community. Some of these learned associations may become salient beliefs about Azerbaijan and influence the attitude towards the country.

The total effect of sportswashing on the downstream variables is the result of the combined effects of the six routes in the model (Figure 3). However, the effects of some routes are likely stronger and will cancel out the effects of others. In particular, backlash effects, if the situation is perceived as sportswashing, should cancel out the effects of indirect and direct affect transfer. Similarly, the effects of association learning should be stronger than the image transfer effects. However, in both cases there may be a difference between the short- and the long run because of the sleeper effect (discussed below).

Moreover, the effects of the six routes are likely moderated by several factors, such as the brand equity of the sports property, the exclusivity of the partnership, and the duration of the sportswashing partnership (Bergkvist and Taylor 2016). Strong sports property brand equity, an exclusive partnership, and an extended duration of the partnership is likely to lead to stronger effects than weak brand equity, a non-exclusive partnership, and a short duration.

Research agenda

To date, there is limited research on sportswashing. Consequently, there are multiple exciting avenues for further research. We propose five areas where advertising scholars could focus and draw on advertising and marketing theories in developing theories and models to be tested in empirical research.

Identifying sportswashing

Researchers need a framework for classifying situations as sportswashing or not. While the distinction is evident in many cases, in some instances, it is nebulous. For example, the same action can constitute sportswashing in one case, and regular marketing activity in another (e.g. sponsoring a sports team), and researchers need an operationalization of the definition to distinguish between nefarious and respectable cases. This operationalization requires the development of criteria for evaluating specific situations and actions. The criteria should address the presence of negative information about the entity and that it deliberately attempts to counteract the negative information by exploiting a sports property.

One way of addressing the presence of negative information is to rely on widely accepted country indicators of democracy, workers' rights, and other criticizable issues. Countries with low scores on such indicators frequently try to counteract criticism and debate about the underlying issues. Table 3 shows well-known and widely accepted national indices for the countries in the previously cited examples of sportswashing and, for comparison, the indices for Denmark and Switzerland. Low

Table 3. Democracy and human rights indices for select countries.

	Azerbaijan	China	Qatar	Russia	Saudi Arabia	Denmark	Switzerland
Democracy[a]	19	13	29	25	12	90	88
Worker's rights[b]	n.a.	20	40	n.a.	40	100	80
LGBT + rights[c]	1	47	7	31	12	88	73
Corruption[d]	30	45	63	™29	53	88	84
Rule of Law[e]	n.a.	47	n.a.	45	n.a.	90	n.a.
Environmental performance[f]	39	28	33	38	38	78	66

[a]The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index (https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020/).
[b]International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) Global Rights Index (https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2022).
[c]Equaldex LGBT Equality Index (https://www.equaldex.com/equality-index).
[d]Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021).
[e]World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global).
[f]Environmental Performance Index (https://epi.yale.edu/epi-results/2022/component/epi).
All scales were converted to 0–100, with higher scores indicating a more positive state of affairs.

scores on one or many indices suggest the country could have reason to engage in activities such as sportswashing to counteract negative information. In addition, newspaper articles, NGO reports, 'social listening' (e.g. web scraping; Boegershausen et al. 2022), and similar sources could indicate that an entity is associated with negative information that could motivate it to engage in sportswashing (see, e.g. Stack 2022 for an example of negative news reporting).

Indicators of the entity's reasons for involvement with a sports property are more challenging than negative information indicators. For a situation to qualify as sportswashing, the entity must intend to exploit a sports property to counteract negative information. Since sportswashers are unlikely to publicly admit their intention, determining whether a particular situation is sportswashing has to rely on indirect indicators providing circumstantial evidence. For example, whether the entity has a history or traditional connection to the sport or whether it has prominent teams or athletes in the sport. Entities without any previous connection to a sport are likelier to be sportswashers (although this is an imperfect indicator as involvement with sports activities is driven by a host of factors such as economic development, status, and reputation). Another indicator is whether the involvement with the sports property fits in the broader picture of 'washing' activities. For example, Saudi Arabia has a long history of spending billions of dollars promoting Wahhabism, a conservative interpretation of Islam (Ghattas 2020), while at the same time trying to associate themselves with female football abroad (Worden 2023). A further indication of sportswashing intentions would be that the entity is unwilling to address the underlying issues causing negative information (Fruh, Archer, and Wojtowicz 2023). Evidence for this could be found in news reports and in reports from non-governmental organizations, such as Amnesty International, the International Labor Organization, and Human Rights Watch.

Thus, classifying a situation as sportswashing has to be based on evidence-based judgment rather than objective indicators. A framework that supports the classification will help scholars in their judgment and promote uniformity across studies. Such a framework should be based on several indicators of negative information and the entity's intentions, a scoring system, and a cut-off point that indicates whether a situation is sportswashing or not (see Kelly et al. 2012, for an example of a framework to determine whether a situation is ambush marketing or not).

Develop a framework of actors and their roles in sportswashing

Sportswashing involves several actors with different roles in a complex network. A first step towards understanding how sportswashing works and the factors influencing its execution is to map the actors and outline their roles. Recent research on sponsorships offers a starting point. Cornwell, Frank, and Miller-Moudgil (2023) identified the actors in sponsorships as sports property, sponsors, governing bodies, media, venue/team/fans, and host community. The same actors are relevant in a sportswashing context but must be supplemented with additional actors. Hosting an event usually involves local and national politicians and decision-makers, and mega-events frequently also involve international political leaders. For example, FIFA's decision to award the 2022 World Cup to Qatar was influenced by the French President at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, as shown in an extensive corruption investigation in France (Ladden-Hall 2022). In addition, mega-events often involve corporations, PR consultants, various middlemen, and power brokers (Jennings 2011), and non-government organizations, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, often participate in debates and provide information. Thus, research identifying the actors involved in sportswashing must cast a wide net.

The roles played by the different actors can be expected to vary between situations. For example, host communities frequently interact positively with events (Cornwell, Frank, and Miller-Moudgil 2023). However, local communities increasingly vote against hosting mega-events in referenda, making it increasingly challenging for sports bodies, such as the IOC, to find host cities (Lenskyj 2020). Furthermore, the role of host communities is likely to vary between democracies and autocratic countries.

Fans play an essential role in all sports contexts. In sportswashing, fans might be supportive, questioning, or hostile towards the sportswasher. For example, many fans of Newcastle United expressed joy when Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund acquired 80% of the club, making the club one of the richest in the world, although some fans were worried about the moral implications (Harris 2021).

The media play the most complex and interesting role. The media buys sports broadcasting rights, thereby funding the governing sports bodies, and they broadcast and report on sports events (Cornwell, Frank, and Miller-Moudgil 2023). However, the media's role is also to critically report on conditions in host countries and pose uncomfortable questions to athletes, coaches, and sports potentates. This role has become increasingly difficult. Several governing sports bodies have introduced rules restricting press freedom and barred uncomfortable journalists from attending events and press conferences (Higgins 2022; Jennings 2011). Nosy journalists are essential for backlash against sportswashing, and restricting their work supports the sportwashers. As with host communities, the role of the media is expected to vary considerably between democracies and autocracies.

There is a wealth of secondary sources, such as books and news reports, that can be used to outline the actors and their roles in sportswashing (see, e.g. Jennings 2011, for an account of corruption in FIFA and the IOC; Robinson and Clegg 2019, for an account of sportswashing in the English Premier League). However, an in-depth understanding of the machinations of sportswashing will require personal interviews with different actors.

Determine the effects of sportswashing

The effects of sportswashing on local and international target audiences have yet to be determined. A limited number of studies have provided some indications of mega-event effects. Still, the results are mixed, showing positive, negative, and null effects on public perceptions, attitudes, and media content. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that the 1978 FIFA Men's World Cup in Argentina was a PR success for the military regime (Scharpf, Gläßel, and Edwards 2023); an analysis of secondary public opinion data suggests that the 2008 Beijing Olympics had no positive effects on international perceptions of China (Manzenreiter 2010); and an analysis of Google Trends data for the Olympic Games and FIFA world cups between 2004 and 2018 found a significant increase in Google searches around the events (Kobierecki and Strożek 2021). Notably, to the best of our knowledge, there exists no attempt at primary data collection to measure the target audience effects of sportswashing. Overall, it appears that the effectiveness of sportswashing in counteracting negative information and creating positive downstream effects (e.g. positive effects on a country image) is largely unknown and requires further empirical research.

The first step should be to establish whether sportswashing positively affects the target audience perceptions of the sportswasher. One way of investigating target audience perceptions is by using web scraping (Boegershausen et al. 2022) and text analysis (Berger et al. 2022). Capturing and analyzing online content over time would provide insights into how the sportswasher is perceived and how this affects online comments and recommendations. Alternatively, target audience perceptions could be captured using a longitudinal cohort research design measuring target audience perceptions before and after a sportswashing occurrence.[1]

The best type of sports property for initial research is hosting a mega-event (e.g. FIFA World Cup, Summer Olympics) or an event with an identifiable target audience (e.g. Formula 1). Events have finite durations, and timing before and after surveys is easier than for other sports properties, such as purchasing a football club or sponsorships. Mega-events reach massive audiences, attract much attention, and generate copious online talk to be analyzed in web scraping. In a survey approach, representative population samples should generate enough respondents exposed to the event. For smaller events, web scraping and surveys must sample the event's target audience. Dependent variables of interest would be awareness of and attitude towards the sportswasher, relevant intentions (e.g. purchase products, visit country), beliefs about contentious issues (e.g. democracy, women's rights), and detection of sportswashing (in the post-survey). While a correlational study would not definitively establish a causal relationship between sportswashing and improved target audience perceptions, web scraping and survey research would strongly indicate whether sportswashing has detectable effects in a real-world setting and lay the foundation for further studies, such as experiments and studies of moderating variables.

Experimental research is essential to establish causal relationships. Once initial research has shown the likely presence of real-world sportswashing effects, the next step is to demonstrate the causal relationship between sportswashing and sportswasher-related dependent variables in laboratory and field experiments. This research can be modeled on advertising experiment methodology (see overview and

recommendations in Geuens and De Pelsmacker 2017), particularly research on LMC, such as sponsorships and celebrity endorsements (Bergkvist and Taylor 2016), although scholars should take care to avoid common mistakes and weaknesses of advertising research (see De Pelsmacker 2021). Importantly, early-stage experimental research must include a control group without any form of persuasive communication to demonstrate that sportswashing has an effect beyond a null alternative.

There are a multitude of factors likely to moderate the effects of sportswashing. The effects should vary depending on the type of sportswasher (e.g. state, corporation) and the type of sports property (e.g. mega-event, sports club). The effects should also vary depending on the target audience. For example, people in democracies with a free press are likely to respond differently than people in autocracies lacking press freedom. Target audience differences could, at least initially, be investigated in pre-post surveys. However, in many cases, the effects of the type of sportswasher and sports property require experimental research in which the moderating variables of interest are manipulated and other factors controlled.

Another concern of interest for the effects of sportswashing is the difference between short- and long-term effects. Usually, in persuasive communication, the short-term effects are more potent than the long-term effects (Bergkvist and Rossiter 2008). However, when the communicator lacks credibility, the long-term persuasive effects may be stronger than the short-term effects, known as the sleeper effect (Hovland et al. 1949). If the communicator lacks credibility, this serves as a discounting cue decreasing the short-term persuasive effect. Over time, however, the message recipients may remember the message but forget the discounting cue (i.e. the message source), which will likely increase the persuasive effects (Kumkale and Albarracín 2004). Thus, the short-term effects on sportswasher perceptions may be negative but become more positive over time as the target audience forgets the source of learned associations. Investigating the sleeper effect requires longitudinal research.

How sportswashing works on the individual level

The proposed model of individual level effects of sportswashing (Figure 3) offers several research opportunities. Each route in the model includes hypotheses about the effects on the dependent variables and, for backlash effects and indirect affect transfer, mediating variables. Studying these individual-level effects will require both survey and experimental research.

Backlash effects, that is, whether and why individuals perceive a situation as sportswashing, and how this affects their evaluation of the sportswasher would be of particular interest. Initially, survey research should establish that people perceive certain events and situations as sportswashing, try to identify factors that influence this perception, and investigate whether it influences the attitude towards the sportswasher. Once the effect and relationship is established, experimental research could establish a causal relationship and investigate factors driving the sportswashing perception. For example, information about the sportswasher could be systematically varied to identify the type of information that causes individuals to perceive a situation as sportswashing. A similar approach could be used to investigate whether and

how individuals learn associations with the sportswasher and how this affect their beliefs about it, which is also a novel and relevant topic.

Feedback effects on governing sports bodies, sponsors, clubs, and athletes

Marketing alliances involving two or more partners generate communication effects not only on the brand but also feedback effects on the other partners. Research on, for example, sponsorships, celebrity endorsements, and cause-related marketing shows both positive and negative feedback effects on the partners (e.g. Arsena, Silvera, and Pandelaere 2014; Basil and Herr 2003; Ruth and Simonin 2003; see overview in Bergkvist and Taylor 2016). In sportwashing, anecdotal evidence suggests that the 2022 World Cup in Qatar damaged FIFA's reputation (West 2023), and the enormous salaries paid to football players joining Saudi Arabian teams have attracted considerable attention (e.g. Turak 2022). Thus, there is scope for investigating whether negative associations with the sportswasher entail negative feedback effects on governing sports bodies and other parties, such as sponsors, clubs, and athletes.

Of particular interest would be to investigate how the fans of European football clubs acquired by sportswashers respond. Football fans are heavily involved with their clubs and interact with the club and other fans in multiple ways (Winell 2023), and many identify strongly with their clubs (Mazodier, Henderson, and Beck 2018). However, a recent study suggests that acquisition of a brand risks eroding the brand's authenticity, with negative downstream effects on brand attitude and related variables, particularly if the acquiring organization's values are misaligned with the brand and the brand is old (Biraglia et al. 2023). Thus, it seems likely the authenticity of the football club brand will be eroded if an organization without obvious football-related values acquires a football club with a long tradition. Two recent examples of such acquisitions are Qatar Sports Investments takeover of Paris St. Germain (founded in 1970), and the takeover of Newcastle United (founded in 1892) by a consortium led by the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund.

Conclusion

Sportswashing has demonstrated its relevance to scholars and a broader audience in the Emergence stage of construct evolution and is now at the beginning of the Conceptualization stage (Bergkvist and Eisend 2021). In this paper, we have proposed an updated sportswashing definition addressing weaknesses in previous definitions and laying the ground for continued work on this relevant construct. We have also proposed two theoretical frameworks of how sportswashing works, one from the perspective of the sportswasher, and one of individual-level effects. Both frameworks can guide future research on sportswashing. In addition, we have suggested three other areas for future research.

To date, research on sportswashing has been done by researchers in other fields than marketing and advertising. The present paper shows the relevance of advertising theory to sportswashing, and we hope researchers in the field will be inspired to carry out empirical research on this topical issue.

Note

1. A panel design is not suitable as the first wave would likely influence how respondents perceive and process the event, and their responses to the second wave.

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