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'Fog on the tyne'? The 'common-sense' focus on 'sportswashing' and the 2021 takeover of Newcastle United

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ABSTRACT

On 7 October 2021, a controversial takeover of the English Premier League team Newcastle United Football Club saw an 80% stake acquired by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF), the country's sovereign wealth fund. Public discussion and media coverage of the takeover has revolved almost entirely around the concept of 'sportswashing' – the practice of (usually) undemocratic regimes using sporting investments to 'cleanse' or enhance their reputation and deflect attention away from human rights abuses. This article examines the Newcastle takeover, interrogating the widespread portrayal of it as a clear-cut case of sportswashing, and explores alternative explanations for the purchase, and potentially other sports-related investments. Drawing broadly on scholarship by Bourdieu and scholars of the Arabian Peninsula, it argues that the concept of sportswashing as it is currently used limits discussion of wider, more complex social, political and economic entanglements.

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"'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less'. 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things'. 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master – that's all".[1] (Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass)

Introduction

On 7 October 2021, a controversial takeover of the English Premier League team Newcastle United Football Club saw an 80% stake acquired by the Saudi Arabian Public Investment Fund (PIF). The takeover saw an unlikely pairing of an underachieving club, based in a working-class post-industrial city in the Northeast of England well-known for its nightlife and its reputation as a 'party city', with one of the largest sovereign wealth funds in the world, and a country perhaps best known for its immense wealth, involvement in the war in Yemen, human rights abuses, the strong religious influence of Wahhabism, and the execution and dismembering of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Public discussion and media coverage of the takeover has revolved almost entirely around the concept of 'sportswashing' – the practice of (usually) undemocratic regimes using sporting investments to 'cleanse' or enhance their reputation and deflect attention away from human rights abuses. Academic engagement with the concept of 'sportswashing' is limited, and, in a recent editorial, the editors of this journal suggest that, in relation to the 'relatively new buzzword "sportswashing …

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there remains a distinct lack of criticality in much of what is written about the obvious misuse of sport and sporting events by states that have a lot to 'wash' (Grix *et al*. 2022, p. 585).

Some scholars have recently begun to explore the concept a little more, highlight its limitations, and propose ways in which it can be put to analytic use (Fruh *et al*. 2022, Grix *et al*. 2023, Kearns *et al*. 2023, Taylor *et al*. 2023). Skey (2022, p. 1) states that 'there has been limited academic discussion of the term and certainly no sustained analysis of what it might or might not offer to sports scholars', whilst Boykoff (2022, p. 1) notes that the term 'suffers from definitional imprecision and is often applied solely to autocrats'. Chadwick (2020) suggests that 'without more sophisticated analyses and nuanced debate, rather lazy labelling will no doubt continue, and those countries that do engage in using sport-washing will be more likely to get away with it'. Kearns *et al*. (2023, p. 5) have also recently argued that scholarship on sponsorship or ownership of teams is 'under-examined as a sportswashing strategy when compared with the emerging literature on sportswashing through the hosting of major events'.

This article examines the Saudi-led purchase of Newcastle, questions the widespread framing of this as a clear-cut case of sportswashing, and explicates some potential alternative reasons for the purchase. We draw on the concept of 'constructed exceptionalism' (Thiollet and Vignal 2016, p. 4) in relation to literature on Arabian Peninsula sports investments to highlight how these investments are viewed differently to similar ones made by others. Thiollet and Vignal argue that research on the Gulf more broadly has been dominated 'by representations which might be qualified as culturalist, [and/or] "orientalist"', leading to countries within the peninsula remaining 'at the geographical and scientific margins of research on globalization and transnational phenomena' (2016, p. 4).

We begin with a summary of the concept of 'sportswashing', its etymology, its usage to date and some reflections on recent academic engagement with the concept. Drawing broadly on work by Pierre Bourdieu, his concept of doxa – the widespread acceptance of 'common-sense' and 'self-evident' opinions – and some of his other, more politically engaged work, the following section discusses the relative lack of critical engagement around 'sportswashing'. The attention then turns to the PIF and the recent increase in Saudi Arabian investments in sports. Media coverage of the takeover and subsequent developments is then analysed, including bringing to the fore some of the agents, institutions and relations, that have remained relatively marginalised in discussions to date. We then suggest that the takeover cannot be adequately explained by 'sportswashing' arguments before a concluding section discusses the potential relevance of our argument for a wider discussion on sportswashing.

'Sportswashing'

There is a long, and often problematic, pedigree of political involvement in sports events and competitions. Concepts such as sports diplomacy, 'soft power', and 'place branding' have been used to describe such interventions, with the 1934 FIFA men's World Cup, the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 'ping pong diplomacy' between China and the United States in the 1970s often highlighted as early examples (see Skey 2022 for a good, brief, introduction to some of these terms).

The first recorded use of the term 'sportswashing' according to the Oxford English Dictionary was 5 April 2012 on Twitter when @Jinjirrie tweeted 'Big up for the Arab sports council, which boycotts Adidas over sportswashing Jerusalem marathon'. The Azerbaijani human rights defender Gulnara Akhundova used the term in an article for *The Independent* newspaper about the Baku European Games in 2015, arguing that 'a fearsome PR machine is using sport to sweep human rights under the carpet' and that 'tyrannical, corrupt regimes bid to host major sports events in the hope of using them as propaganda' (Akhundova 2015). In the same year, however, a journalist used the term to refer to the under-performance and quick exit of sports personalities from the reality television show *I'm a Celebrity . . . Get Me Out of Here*, calling this 'the great sportswash of 2015' (Smith 2015).

Usage of the term increased in 2018 when it was used to criticise Leeds United's football tour of Myanmar, the Israeli hosting of the opening stage of the Giro d'Italia cycling race, Abu Dhabi's

involvement with Manchester City, an exhibition match between tennis stars Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic in Saudi Arabia, and the FIFA men's World Cup in Russia. The increase in usage has only accelerated since 2018. Miguel Delaney, a journalist and frequent proponent of the term argued in 2020 that whilst sportswashing was not new, 'it had never been more insidious' (Delaney 2020b). The Language Council of Norway chose 'sportswashing' as their word of the year in 2021 (Elsborg 2022), and 2022 has been referred to as 'the year of 'sportswashing' (Boykoff 2022, p. 5) and potentially 'sportswashing's biggest year' (Zidan 2022). The recent focus has shifted to Saudi Arabia's purchase of Newcastle United and other sport investments around golf, boxing and Formula 1 racing, the Winter Olympics in Beijing, the FIFA men's World Cup in Qatar, and the Qatar-related bid for ownership of Manchester United.

Increased usage has not been matched by definitional clarity, however, and there are a number of different definitions and explanations of 'sportswashing', with Boykoff (2022, p. 5) arguing that 'there is no one-size-fits-all model'. The aforementioned Language Council of Norway define it as 'when governments in authoritarian countries use major sporting events to put themselves in a better light or seek to achieve the same by buying up or sponsoring popular sports clubs'. Delaney (2020b) does not offer a succinct definition, acknowledging that there is often some debate about this, but in an article examining the sports purchases of Abu Dhabi, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, he suggests that 'virtually all academics and human rights bodies at least use the term'. He goes on to argue that it is 'really about integration', 'part of a more sophisticated strategy' to promote business opportunities, that 'usually works spectacularly'. Fruh *et al*. (2022, p. 5) discuss paradigm cases of sportswashing, which are cases in which there: is a serious and widespread moral violation; there is state involvement; and there is a deliberate or strategic use of sport to moderate the reputational damage. They then, however, state that 'departures from the paradigm case are possible along all three of the listed dimensions' and that 'further variation … is also possible' (Fruh *et al*. 2022, p. 7).

Boykoff (2022, p. 1), in an attempt to develop a typology of sportswashing, defines it 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.

He had previously suggested that 'what a lot of people in sports studies call "Sportswashing",' was the use of 'sports megaevents to try to launder your reputation on the world stage' (Francis 2022). Here the concept of sportswashing potentially overlaps with that of 'soft power', and Jones *et al*. (2023, p. 103) suggest that sportswashing is 'a strategy … to exploit the soft power of sport' to improve reputations and that sportswashing is 'a form of soft power'. Grix *et al*. (2023, p. 3) argue that sportswashing not only overlaps with soft power but 'is – eventually – part of, longer-term state 'soft power' strategies. We do not have the space to fully interrogate the interplay between the concepts of 'soft power', 'soft disempowerment' ('those occasions in which a given state may upset, offend or alienate others, leading to a *loss* of attractiveness or influence' (Brannagan and Giulianotti 2015, p. 714 original emphasis)), and 'sportswashing', although we do believe this would be a worthwhile endeavour. Koch (2012, 2018) has suggested that the 'soft power approach poses a number of problems', not least its association with statist thinking, and is not necessarily helpful in understanding or explaining all Gulf investments in sport, despite its ubiquity (see, for example, Haghirian and Robles-Gil 2021, Al Thani 2022, and Naess 2023 for articles relating to Qatar's hosting of the men's World Cup). More recently, Kearns *et al*. (2023, p. 4 original emphasis) have noted that accounts of 'soft disempowerment' 'serve only to emphasise the ongoing vacuity of conceptual understandings of power as some*thing* that a particular group can obtain, inflict or even manage'.

Boykoff also observes that 'domestic audiences are crucial to understanding the political complexities of sportswashing' (2022, p. 1). He argues that, if 'one focuses only on the external-audience image-improvement strategies' (2022, p. 3) then the Sochi Winter Olympics in Russia in 2014 would be considered a 'flop', but that this was only part of the story and that domestic messaging intended to cultivate 'symbolic support for the government and wider political system' (2022, p. 4) was also

a key element.[2] A similar point relating to the London Olympics 'legacy' of increased participation in sports amongst young people in the UK is made to extend the discussion of sportswashing to include democracies. He also draws attention to the relatively recent shift from the hosting of mega-events like Formula 1 races, the Olympics or the World Cup to the sponsorship and ownership of sports teams in different countries or, as Boykoff (2022, p. 6) puts it 'when authoritarian countries take their sportswashing show on the road', 'essentially renting the world's best athletes as de facto ambassadors'. Perhaps most interestingly, given that 'sportswashing' is generally considered to be about enhancing or cleansing a county's reputation, Boykoff (2022, p. 7) suggests that 'in seeking the redistribution of reputational power, sportswashers can simultaneously unlatch the gate toward brass-knuckle military intervention', highlighting the Russian invasion of the Crimean Peninsula after the Sochi Games and the intensification of the Saudi-led war in Yemen after the purchase of Newcastle United. Earlier in the article he argues that 'Sportswashing cannot merely be reduced to an elaborate and exorbitant branding exercise. It can actually be a conveyor belt of life and death' (2022, p. 2). He concludes his arguments with 'four fresh contentions' relating to sportswashing:

(1) Sportswashing activities are not limited to autocrats.
(2) Domestic audiences are important in understanding the practice, but they are often neglected or overlooked.
(3) Sportswashing can preclude and 'set the stage for' military intervention
(4) 'New forms' of sportswashing are emerging.
(Boykoff 2022, pp. 7–8)

Some points of disagreement with these articles will be elaborated upon later, but for now it is perhaps worth emphasising some key points relating to the widespread use of sportswashing in recent times. The term is slippery, deployed casually and extensively, and is hard to pin down. Originally used to describe hosting of mega-events, the term is also now used to describe ownership and sponsorship arrangements. Some commentators suggest that the purpose of sportswashing is related to reputational improvement, whilst others suggest it is about integration, or legitimation, or concealment or deflection. The use of sport is therefore strategic, or part of a wider strategy. There is a strong link with concerns around human rights abuses, from its origins nearly a decade ago, to the current time. It has, to date, primarily been levied at authoritarian regimes and 'states', rather than democracies or corporations, although many definitions do not preclude such usage. The focus has largely remained on the investors, rather than on the relations between investor and recipient (see Grix *et al*. 2023 for a good critique of this focus). It is generally assumed that the intended audience is international, and not domestic, but this potential oversight appears to be being addressed.

Bourdieusian reflections

Pierre Bourdieu's extensive body of work has been deployed across a wide range of disciplines, including, and of relevance here, sport, international relations, and media relations (see, for example, Benson and Neveu 2005, Bigo 2011, Bergsgard 2018, Harris *et al*. 2021). Bourdieu and others have cautioned against stripping out some of his concepts and using them in isolation or as 'intellectual hairspray' (Reay 2004, p. 432). Here, for reasons of space and relevancy, we focus primarily on three, related areas of Bourdieu's work: his concept of doxa, the role of the media and commentators in constructing social reality, and constructions of 'the state'.

DiMaggio (1979, p. 1461), in an oft-quoted passage, and with particular relevance for a discussion of sportswashing, argued that 'Bourdieu takes as his subject precisely those attitudes, dispositions, and ways of perceiving reality that are taken for granted by members of a social class or a society'. Bourdieu reasoned that it was necessary for sociologists to break with common sense views and widely used classificatory systems, suggesting that '*[t]he presconstructed is everywhere*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 235 original emphasis). He referred to the widespread taking for granted of

opinions and positions as *doxa*, thus highlighting a distinction from the concepts of heterodoxy and orthodoxy where alternative opinions are available and debated, although not necessarily accepted. Doxa is a 'collective belief' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 167), a 'discourse of common sense' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 248), and highlighting the lack of critical reflection associated with a doxic idea, Bourdieu notes that it '*goes without saying because it comes without saying*' (Bourdieu 1977, p. 167 original emphasis). Doxa leads to situations where there is little questioning of classifications, with the world appearing as 'self-evident', and is the ultimate outcome of attempts to make the arbitrary appear natural (Bourdieu 1977, pp. 164–167). This 'uncontested acceptance of the daily lifeworld' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 73) was significant, Bourdieu argued, precisely because it 'represents the most radical form of acceptance of the world, the most absolute form of conservatism … the ultimate form of conformism' (1992, p. 74).

Bourdieu was particularly scornful of politicians, commentators, and journalists who propagated doxic views, 'technicians of opinion who think themselves wise' (Stabile and Morooka 2010, p. 38), referring to them as 'doxosophists', 'would be scholars of the obvious' (Bourdieu *et al*. 1999, p. 629), and arguing that:

> Social science today is up against anyone and everyone with a claim to interpret the most obvious signs of social malaise … It has to deal with these people, too clever by half and armed with their 'common sense' and their pretensions, who rush into print or to appear on television to tell us what is going on in a social world that they have no effective means of knowing or understanding. (Bourdieu *et al*. 1999, p. 628)

Elsewhere he railed against 'knee-jerk sociology' and 'spontaneous sociology' (Bourdieu *et al*. 1991, p. 20), instant responses to complex social issues, with his collaborator Patrick Champagne (Bourdieu *et al*. 1999, p. 47) highlighting how:

> The media act on the spur of the moment and collectively fabricate a social representation that, even when it is rather distant from reality, persists despite subsequent denials or later corrections because, quite often, it merely reinforces spontaneous interpretations and hence mobilizes prejudices and thereby magnifies them.

'Sportswashing' can thus be understood as a 'commonplace' – a term that is argued with, but rarely or never argued over in popular media – and a 'strange Newspeak' that forms part of the 'new planetary vulgate' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, p. 2). Human rights charities and non-governmental organisations are endowed with the symbolic power – 'a power to construct reality' (Bourdieu 1979, p. 79) – to discuss issues of human rights, and to comment on, and *to give a name to*, alleged attempts to deflect attention away from violations and abuses of them. Their perspectives and opinions are then produced and reproduced through media outlets around the globe, as we will see. The ubiquity of the concept acts as a form of doxa, with other possible explanations for state-led or state-backed investments in sport pushed to the margins of public debate and understanding. Academics, journalists and social commentators who use the term uncritically can be viewed as doxosophists, willing to use explanations provided for them without consideration of the wider historical and contemporary contexts, and without looking for alternative ways of understanding complex social, political, cultural, and economic events and developments. One scholar of sport in the Middle East, in discussing the concept of 'Sportswashing' has 'accused journalists in general for being lazy, not getting the facts straight, and searching for a quick comment rather than a deeper understanding of human rights and workers' rights issues in the Gulf region' (Jorgensen 2022).

Bourdieu also applied his critical thinking to ideas of 'the state'. He argued that 'the state is this well-founded illusion, this place that exists essentially because people believe it exists (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 10)' and that the state was not a 'bloc', but a 'field' (2010, p. 20) and therefore needed to be analysed in terms of relations and forces operating within that field, rather than as a single 'thing' or 'entity'. Wacquant (2010, p. 200) elaborated on this perspective by suggested that: 'Bourdieu has proposed that we construe the state, not as a monolithic and coordinated ensemble, but as a splintered space of forces … which he calls the "bureaucratic field".' Bourdieu (Bourdieu *et al.* 1994, p .2) questioned portrayals of the state and bureaucracy as 'a "universal group" endowed with

the intuition of, and will, to universal interest' or 'a rational instrument in charge of realizing the general interest' and suggested this was another exemplar of thinkers and writers using terms uncritically and without proper interrogation. This is particularly relevant to our discussions in this paper, both in terms of discussions about state involvement in sportswashing activities generally, but also in relation to the Newcastle takeover and the role of the PIF, the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia.

The public investment fund and Saudi investment in sport

The PIF was established in 1971 and initially supported domestic companies which were of significant importance to the Saudi economy. It was 'reborn' in March 2015, when the fund was placed under 'newly formed Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA), with the Crown Prince HRH Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz (MBS)'. The PIF is now closely aligned with Saudi Arabia's primary economic program, Vision 2030, with it being described as 'the active engine' driving the transformation and diversification of the Saudi economy, and with MBS himself. Of the eight PIF board members (in addition to MBS, the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia) six are government ministers, and one is an Advisor at the Royal Court. The final member of the board Yasir bin Othman Al-Rumayyan is the Governor of the PIF, and the current chairman of Newcastle United.

PIF currently manages assets and investments worth more than $600 billion, with a target of taking this to over $1 trillion by 2025, with 30% accounted for by international investments. Its investments include a 5% stake in Nintendo, and it holds, or has held, stakes in other household names such as Uber, Disney, Facebook, Bank of America, BP, and Boeing. Much of this spending was attributed to a desire to look for opportunities in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, with Al-Rumayyan quoted as saying 'You don't want to waste a crisis' (England and Massoudi 2020). In an article in January 2023 reviewing the 'new Gulf sovereign wealth fund boom', the Financial Times suggested that 'in terms of scale and ambition, nothing compares [across the Gulf]' to what the PIF is attempting to achieve' (England *et al*. 2023).

Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 includes plans for two new mega-cities, NEOM and Qiddiya, both of which include plans for sports facilities capable of hosting global events. In addition to these two cities, the vision includes a focus on sports and entertainment via the *Quality of Life Program* (KSA 2022). The program includes 10 objectives, 3 of which are: Promoting sports activities in the community; Achieving excellence in several sports regionally and internationally; and Developing and diversifying entertainment opportunities to meet the needs of the population. There is no mention in Vision 2030 documents about using sport to improve the reputation of Saudi Arabia abroad.

Chadwick and Widdop (2022, p. 234) note that Saudi investment in sport has lagged behind some of its neighbours in recent years, and that the increased investment in this area has come since MBS became Crown Prince. They suggest that:

> policy and strategy have, over the last five years, focused more on developing and promoting sport. MBS has been a driving force behind this; a reformer keen to change Saudi Arabia whilst appealing to the country's youthful population, he sees sport as a means through which to pursue multiple goals.

This new strategic focus on sport within the country has seen high-profile investments in sports with global appeal such as boxing, Formula 1, golf, and football (see Elsborg 2023, Ettinger 2023 for summaries). Trojena, a region in the yet to be completed NEOM city, will host the Asian Winter Olympics in 2029. Whilst many investments have involved Saudi hosting or sponsorship of existing events and tournaments, the launch of a new PIF-funded golf tour, LIV Golf, to rival existing golf tours in Europe and the USA was described as 'a new approach to financing and operating a professional sport competition' that had never been seen before (Davis *et al*. 2023, p. 2). In June 2023, it was announced that the three main tours (LIV Golf, PGA Tour and DP World Tour) would 'merge' with Al-Rumayyan installed as the Chair of the new tour. Accompanying the

investment in in relatively 'traditional' sports, Saudi Arabia has also expanded into the world of esports, with MBS unveiling 'a National Gaming and Esports Strategy that aims to make Saudi Arabia the global hub for the gaming and esports sector by 2030' (Elsborg 2023) in September 2022.

Saudi investments in football, the world's most popular sport, are multiple. As well as the purchase of Newcastle United, investments and developments include: a strategic partnership between Manchester United and the Saudi General Sports Authority; hosting of the Spanish Super Cup; the hosting of the FIFA Club World Cup in 2023 and a planned bid, to host to the FIFA Men's World Cup in 2034; and recruiting Lionel Messi as a tourist ambassador;

As well as the international investments, however, there is also a focus on internal and domestic developments. In December 2022, following the cancellation of his contract with Manchester United, Cristiano Ronaldo was enticed to sign for Saudi club Al-Nassr. In June 2023, four of the leading clubs in Saudi Arabia – Al-Ittihad, Al-Nassr, Al-Hilal, and Al-Ahli – were taken over by the PIF, leading to a large number of high-profile players and managers joining the Saudi Pro League. Chadwick and Widdop (2022, p. 235) also note that sport is also seen in with Kingdom 'as a way of addressing sociocultural challenges, a means of tackling a health crisis, a new way of engaging with the rest of the world . . . [and] a popular leisure and entertainment activity'. They note the strategic importance of grassroots sports development, the promotion of women's involvement in sport, and attempts to improve the standard and success of Saudi athletes and teams.

The takeover of Newcastle United football club

The PIF-backed takeover of Newcastle United was eventually completed on 7 October 2021. A previous attempt to buy the club in April 2020 had stalled, as a result of concerns about piracy of Premier League content in the Gulf area (Ingle 2020), political tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia (Taylor 2020), and the independence of the PIF from the Saudi government. The sports-washing narrative was already in full flow at this stage with *The Independent* newspaper publishing an article with the title 'Saudi Arabia's takeover of Newcastle is nakedly political – it's about sports-washing, not football' (Delaney 2020a). In July 2020, following weeks of deadlock and no apparent progress being made, the consortium withdrew its offer for the club. In September 2020, the then owner of the club, Mike Ashley initiated legal action against the Premier League, accusing it of not acting 'appropriately' (Aarons 2020) during the takeover process.

In April 2021, it was reported that MBS had warned the then UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson that relations between the two countries 'would be damaged if the British government failed to intervene to "correct" the Premier League's "wrong" decision' (Wintour 2021) to not allow the takeover. Johnson had reportedly asked Edward Lister, his special envoy for the Gulf, to investigate. Lister apparently told journalists that 'he asked the Premier League for a decision on the takeover, one way or the other, rather than lobbying on behalf of the consortium'.

Little substantive progress was made in the matter, publicly at least, until 6 October 2021, when it was announced that the piracy situation had been resolved, the Premier League had received 'legally binding assurances' that there was a separation between the Saudi state and the PIF, and the takeover was being revived. The 'spontaneous sociology' of sportswashing returned immediately, with *The Telegraph* arguing that:

> we should be well aware that this is about 'sportswashing' – cleansing the image of a regime denounced for its human rights abuses, the war in Yemen and the brutal methods used for the suppression of political and social unrest inside the country, through a Premier League football club (Edwards 2021, p. 2)

The consortium, which also included ten per cent stakes in the club for the financier Amanda Staveley and her husband Mehrdad Ghodoussi, and the property developer Jamie Reuben, officially took control of the club on Thursday 7 October. Thousands of fans gathered at St. James' Park, the

home ground of Newcastle United, to celebrate the takeover, many of them wearing home-made shemaghs (a traditional Arabic headdress) or waving Saudi flags.

Many national newspapers included extensive coverage of the takeover, both in the main news sections, and the sports pages. The front page of *The Telegraph* included a photograph of two Newcastle fans wearing Newcastle shirts and Arabic headdresses, whilst the sports section carried an article headed 'In a sport awash with amorality, the Saudis represent a new nadir' which referred to Newcastle as 'the latest pawn in the Saudi sportswashing campaign' and claimed that 'the endgame of using sport to gloss over barbarity is transparent' (Brown 2021, p. 3).

The front page of the tabloid newspaper *The Mirror* also featured a photograph of fans and an article inside the paper stated that the Saudis are 'obviously keen to sports-wash their global image by waking up English football's ultimate sleeping giant' (Thomson 2021, p. 9). *The Times* sports section used a quotation from Amanda Staveley – 'Sportswashing isn't buying a club in the relegation zone' – as its title, whilst she also claimed, 'this is about business investment and doing something special with a fantastic football club with the best fans in the world' (Lawton 2021, pp. 70–71). In addition, on 8 October, *The Guardian, The Mirror, The Sun*, and *The Northern Echo*, all mentioned sportswashing and all but *The Guardian* carried quotes from Amnesty International about the takeover.[3] As well as local and national newspapers covering the takeover, media outlets around the world covered the story, with many of them referencing the claims of sportswashing. *NBC News* in the USA, *Agence France Presse, The Irish Examiner, The Australian, The Calgary Herald* and the *Tehran Times* all discussed the takeover with reference to sportswashing. In total, according to the Lexis Nexis media database, there were over 400 articles globally that mentioned 'Newcastle United' and 'sportswashing' during October 2021.

In the months following the takeover, the doxa of sportswashing persisted, with, for example, the game between Manchester City and Newcastle United in August 2022 referred to as the 'great sportswashing derby' (Wilson 2022). There have been some small-scale protests by a Newcastle supporter's group,[4] but the majority of the fans appear to have welcomed the new owners and their investment in the team (Jones *et al*. 2023). In a podcast with the Newcastle fanzine True Faith (2022), Chadwick suggested that 'One person's sportswashing is another person's soft power', highlighting the often interchangeable nature of the two concepts and the lack of clarity surrounding both.

The intervening period has also seen a series of revelations about the role of the UK government in attempting to broker the deal. Despite Johnson stating in April 2021 that 'The government was not involved at any point in the takeover talks on the sale of Newcastle' (Conn 2022) a different picture has emerged. In May 2022, it was revealed that the then Premier League Chairman Gary Hoffman, told a meeting of the 20 Premier League clubs 'that the government had put pressure on the league to approve the takeover' (Conn 2022). Hoffman became involved with discussions between the then Minister for Investment, Lord Grimstone and Saudi representatives. Grimstone has previously worked for MBS and is reported to be 'very well-connected in Saudi Arabia' (Conn 2022). Further reporting by *The Guardian* later that year highlighted the extent of the government's efforts to 'find a way forward' and to avoid 'embarrassing' hold-ups or failures, publishing detail about emails, internal memos, WhatsApp messages and meetings between the government and the Premier League (Conn and Amin 2022).

More recently, *The Athletic* has set out further interventions by the UK Government, including: the British ambassador to Saudi Arabia meeting PIF officials to discuss the bid; a briefing note being prepared for Johnson prior to a telephone call with MBS in case the takeover was discussed; and the Foreign Office Minister James Cleverly requesting an update on the takeover during a call with the Saudi ambassador to the UK (Crafton 2023). *The Athletic* piece also revealed that, in 2020, prior to the takeover being mooted, the UK agreed a 'strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, which included a commitment for the PIF 'to target direct investments amounting to $30billion (£24bn at today's conversion rates) over a 10-year period into the UK' (Crafton 2023).

Both Saudi Arabia itself and the PIF have been described as 'black boxes' with little known about true motives (Jones 2010, p. 19, Kay 2022), and an accompanying lack of detail from the

UK government and the Premier League has meant that critical perspectives of the takeover have tended to focus on the fan's acquiescence to or celebration of their new owners, and on the concept of 'sportswashing'. Human rights organisations, keen to keep their issues and concerns in the media spotlight have been quick to respond to stories about Newcastle. Similarly, fans wearing traditional Arabic headwear, often willing to talk about their passion, or 'defend' their club, for vox pops or to phone in to radio stations, make for much better and more readily available media 'content' than the silences and closed doors of institutions with more knowledge of the relations, and the exercise of power, behind the takeover. It is perhaps worth pointing out, at this stage, that there is no evidence of sportswashing, beyond statements by charities, journalists, commentators and academics. We would not necessarily expect the term itself to be used in policy documents, or by those accused of it, but given the alleged scale of the practice, we might expect to see traces of the strategy in some documents or texts.

'Call it whatever you want': a discussion

> If sports washing is going to increase my GDP by way of one percent, then I will continue doing sport washing. I don't care. One percent growth of GDP from sport and I'm aiming for another one-and-a-half percent – call it whatever you want, we're going to get that one-and-a-half percent. (MBS, in Aitken 2023)

Chadwick (2020) suggests that sportswashing 'seems to be an unsatisfactory label', for the Saudi involvement in the Newcastle takeover, given the attention that is generated in relation to countries misdemeanours when they become involved in sporting events and purchases. He suggests that that 'If the Public Investment Fund's intention was to artificially create a rosy glow around Saudi Arabia and Newcastle United, then it has had the opposite effect', which brings to mind Brannagan and Giulianotti (2015) concept of 'soft disempowerment'. In an interview with Fox News in September 2023, MBS stated that he didn't care about accusations of sportswashing, arguing that the country's sports investments were about increasing their GDP. Just under a year earlier, Al-Rumayyan noted that Chelsea Football Club had sold for $3.5bn, ten times as much as Newcastle and said 'So, my potential now is to go from $350 m to at least $3.5bn' (Magowan 2022). Clearlake Capital, a Santa Monica-based private equity firm, were heavily involved in the purchase of Chelsea, a decision that was reported as being about financial opportunities and 'because they believe football's financial pie is going to get a lot bigger' (Twomey 2022). There was precious little reporting on these financial opportunities in relation to the purchase of Newcastle, with the doxic focus on sportswashing crowding out alternative explanations, highlighting the 'constructed exceptionalism' of the PIF investment when compared with that of a private equity firm. The beautiful game is a potentially lucrative business, with Deloitte (2022) estimating the revenue of Premier Leagues clubs to be around £6 billion in 2022, with the European game as a whole worth around £27.6 billion. Owning a Premier League club may mean that the old adage about the way to make a small fortune from owning a football club is to start off with a large fortune, may not hold true anymore.

Investments in football clubs in the UK can also open up other economic opportunities. Work exploring the relationship between Manchester City Council and the Abu Dhabi United Group who own Manchester City argued that joint ventures in property developments between the two represented 'a transfer of public wealth to private hands that is difficult to justify' (Goulding *et al*. 2022, p. 5). The council was found to have sold leaseholds for land to the United Group at low rates, had no share of the property assets, and was receiving no rental income streams or asset sales income. The total values of the property assets are estimated at £350 million. Goulding *et al*. (2023, p. 18) argue that:

> 'revenues derived from oil have been recycled into residential property as a means of diversification by urbanisation, facilitated by Manchester City Council as a local state actor in the Global North seeking to revive a stalled urban development agenda following the 2008 financial crisis.

There have also been suggestions that the consortium owning Newcastle 'want to use their influence – and new-found heft – to 'bring levelling-up' [a key UK government policy] to the city and to push 'the Government to start bringing their agenda here' (Slater 2022). There are existing political connections within the consortium, as the Reuben Brothers property development firm owns assets in Newcastle and has extensive contacts and local knowledge.

It has been argued that Gulf land and property investments in foreign countries – so-called 'land grabs' – have shifted from an interest in agricultural land in Africa and parts of Asia to a desire to 'seek land acquisitions in regions deemed more investor friendly . . . with Gulf land purchases increasingly turned towards wealthier countries with extensive farming areas and more secure property rights' (Hanieh 2018 p.122. See also Christophers (2020) for a discussion on the UK as a rentier economy). These new investments in struggling urban areas, encouraged by the UK government, raises questions about who wants to integrate with who, and to what extent private, foreign capital is being used to conceal the effects of austerity and disinvestment by the UK government.

In a series of review articles one year on from the takeover, *The Athletic* noted the potential strategic benefits of Newcastle's location, 'adjacent to the Port of Tyne, with its deepwater container terminal, and the Northeast coast, with its potential for offshore wind power' (Kay 2022). The Northeast has been described as being 'the centre of the UK's green energy revolution' with a 'worldwide reputation for subsea and offshore technology' (Invest North East England, n.d.). The subsea industry is estimated to be worth £20billion annually, with the UK nationally accounting for 45% of that figure. Writing about the importance of natural resources to Saudi political authority and stability, Jones (2010, p. 8) argues that 'establishing authority over resources and the environment has been central to the Al Saud's calculus of power and its approach to governance since the early twentieth century'. It would appear to make sense for a country looking to diversify its economy away from oil receipts to invest in areas renowned for expertise and capacity in renewable energy.

We have also already noted that Saudi Arabia views sport investment, both domestic and international, as a way of addressing numerous challenges at home, including improving population health, and improving relations with young people, which is not dissimilar to many other countries reasons for investing heavily in sport. Aside from all of these reasons to doubt that the PIF might choose to invest in an underperforming but potentially hugely successful Premier League club in the Northeast of England in an effort to moderate or 'cleanse' the reputational damage caused by human rights abuses and the dismembering of Jamal Khashoggi, there is also the possibility that the purchase was opportunistic, something which Chadwick has suggested (Sheldon 2022). There is a story that Staveley met MBS on his yacht in 2019 and informed him that he could own an English Premier League club for less than he paid for Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* (Hardy 2021), which puts the scale of the purchase into perspective, and Al-Rumayyan has acknowledged that the PIF was 'looking into any opportunities' (England and Massoudi 2020) during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. One journalist has argued that rather than viewing investments as strategic sportswashing, 'motives are more primal – a Middle Eastern version of keeping up with the Joneses, a world where status is everything' (Chulov 2021).

Arguing over, rather than with, sportswashing

To recap, in this article we have briefly summarised some concerns relating to the concept of sportswashing, discussed Saudi Arabian sports investments in general, and the takeover of Newcastle United in more detail. Alternative ways of understanding the takeover have also been explicated, and here we turn our attention to whether the Newcastle case and wider scholarship on the Gulf region can be used to interrogate sportswashing activities more broadly, if at all. In short, we wish to argue *over* the 'commonplace' of sportswashing, rather than *with* it.

The argument that Arabian Gulf countries, alongside a small number of others, invest in sport to cleanse, or deflect attention away from their 'reputation' is consistent with what Thiollet and Vignal (2016, p. 4) have referred to as 'constructed exceptionalism' in relation to the Gulf region. There are

a wide variety of investors in national and global sports events and teams, yet it is only a small number that are accused of sportswashing, despite many, if not all, having similar financial motives. Sport is a huge industry, one that opens up many other financial and development opportunities, and one which many people feel has not yet reached maturity or is realising its full profit-making potential. Koch (2014, p. 371) refers to 'popular and scholarly writing on sport and sports-related investment from the Arabian Peninsula [being] shot through with (sometimes more, sometimes less) Orientalist language, all the while masquerading as critique'. Hanieh (2018, p. 4) argues that 'much contemporary writing on the global economy tends to marginalise the position of the Gulf', and either ignores it, views it as an outsider, or sees it 'as a source of oil or a protagonist in conflict'. Globalisation is portrayed as something happening external to the Gulf, that 'encounters the region in some form of pristine and undisturbed state, and then acts to irrevocably change it' (Hanieh 2018, p. 6). More directly, he notes that 'the authoritarian regimes of the [Arabian] peninsula were not formed outside class politics and global economic processes' (Hanieh 2018, p. 7). It is therefore entirely possible that Gulf nations and their sovereign wealth funds invest in sports for similar reasons to other countries, private equity groups and hedge funds.

Critical thinking – the 'solvent of *doxa*' according to Wacquant (2004) – should therefore foreground the historical and contemporary political connections between Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and the wider world and acknowledge that, as Wearing (2022) puts it, 'the persistence of monarchical rule in the Gulf is the result of more than a century of collusion between local elites and the west'. Writing about the Qatar World Cup, he claims that 'to the extent that the tournament serves to sportswash authoritarianism, it will be sportswashing an authoritarianism that has long been a joint venture between the west and Qatar'. Saudi Arabia was constructed as a kingdom by the British is 1932, and is the key American ally in the Gulf, helping to establish some degree of stability in the region. Grix *et al*. (2023, p. 3) have made similar points, arguing that contemporary sportswashing strategies should be understood as 'a reciprocal, bidirectional relationship that entails economic, cultural and social capital gains for all parties involved' and is therefore not something that one actor can do 'on their own'. If sportswashing is taking place via club ownerships and sponsorships such as Newcastle, then Gulf states are by no means the only actors involved, despite the focus being almost exclusively on them.

The complexity of these relations, the 'bureaucratic field' in Bourdieusian terms, both domestically and externally, are often obscured, as 'the [Gulf] nation-state is posited as a self-contained and discrete repository of social relations' (Hanieh 2018, p. 20). Hanieh notes that the size of the ruling family of Saudi Arabia is huge – 'by some estimates upwards of 10,000 people, with various groupings and factional divisions marking Al-Saud internal politics' (2018, p. 20). Koch has also drawn attention to the sometime statist thinking in relation to the Gulf, arguing that 'treating the state as an actor obscures the fact that … it is made up of a vast array of actors, materialities and narratives, which come together to produce its geopolitical imaginary' (Koch 2014, p. 358) echoing Bourdieu's view of the state as 'a splintered space of forces' (Wacquant 2010, p. 289) and the need to prioritise relations over 'things'. She instead highlights the role of significant individuals, and companies, in Gulf sports investments. The central role of MBS, the involvement of Yasir Al-Rumayyan in both the Newcastle takeover and the LIV Golf Tour, and the myriad Saudi companies involved in sports investments suggests that her analysis may be helpful in providing an alternative to the sportswashing doxa. Koch concludes by arguing 'any search for a singular motive for Gulf sport sponsorship is therefore necessarily in vain – there can be only *motives*' (Koch 2014, p. 371).

If one of these motives is part of a broader strategy to aid integration with 'the West', and therefore as an exercise in 'soft power', one might expect to see examples of similar aims in other social, political and economic spheres. However, there is little evidence of this wider strategy. Human rights issues have not seen significant improvement in Saudi Arabia in recent years. In March 2022, 81 men were killed in the 'biggest mass execution in decades' (El Yaakoubi, 2022) and, in August 2022, Salma al Shehab, a Leeds University student, was sentenced to 34 years in prison for following and retweeting dissidents and activists, when

she returned home to Saudi Arabia to visit family (Kirchgaessner 2022). When Joe Biden met MBS in October 2022, to discuss increasing oil production to lower prices, the response from Opec+ was to cut daily production by 2 million barrels in what was described as a 'geopolitical move' and a 'rebuff to the US president's efforts to improve relations with Saudi Arabia (Borger *et al*. 2022). At the same time, relations between Saudi Arabia and Russia have been deepening (Chulov 2022). Similarly, MBS' warning of the damage that could be caused to UK-Saudi relations do not appear to be an example of 'soft power', given the size of Saudi investment in the UK.

Questions surrounding the takeover of Newcastle as a form of sportswashing have relevance in other alleged instances as well. If we can highlight other, potentially competing motives of investors accused of sportswashing, include, and question the motives of the recipients or hosts of investment, and acknowledge limitations with the 'integration' and 'deflection' arguments relating to sportswashing, then the probity and coherence of the concept must be called into question.

Conclusion

This article explores the Saudi-led takeover of Newcastle United to interrogate the concept of sportswashing and its utility both in relation to the takeover and, hopefully, more broadly in relation to other Gulf investments in sports teams and events. We have not mounted a defence of state-sponsored investment in global sports, and nor do we wish to. The intention has been to pose questions about the rationale for these under-examined purchases as much as to provide answers – 'to subject the state to a sort of hyperbolic doubt' in Bourdieu's (1994 p.1) words. We argue that the concept of sportswashing, circulated widely by doxosophists, is potentially problematic in describing and understanding Gulf investments in and ownership of sports teams, and perhaps competitions and events. In doing so, we have highlighted several reasons to doubt the concept of sportswashing, including the 'constructed exceptionalism' that surrounds Gulf nations, and advanced more easily evidenced economic and social interests, including: the investment and divestment opportunities that sports brings, both directly and indirectly; the use of sport to engage domestic audiences; and opportunism. Thus, we are not clear if there has been any attempt to wash anything, and we would certainly agree with Chadwick that any such attempt in relation to the Newcastle takeover has been unsuccessful. If the term is to remain in use, some robust evidence supporting the practice should be produced, and the motives of those institutions involved with the provision of laundry services should also be considered, as Grix *et al*. (2023) have noted.

Most importantly, the concept of sportswashing acts as a *doxa* – a 'discourse of common sense' - and its flexibility and elasticity likely helps to obscure alternative or complementary reasons for sports-related investments, inhibits greater critique and research into investment decisions and strategies, and therefore limits our understanding. To be clear, just because human rights organisations refer to certain investment decisions as sportswashing, it does not mean that they should be accepted as such. Single issue groups and campaigning organisations may be forgiven for thinking that, if the only tool they have is a hammer, everything should be viewed as a nail, but journalists, commentators, and scholars should perhaps try a little harder to look for alternative explanations.

Notes

1. The title of the article refers to a 1971 song by the Northeast folk band *Lindisfarne*.
2. It should be noted that the term 'sportswashing' was never applied to the Sochi Winter Olympics at the time, and there has been little retrospective work linking the two.
3. *The Sunderland Echo*, the local newspaper covering Newcastle United's great rivals, Sunderland AFC, did not mention the takeover once in its edition on 8 October.
4. NUFC Fans Against Sportswashing. Twitter - @NoSaudiToon.

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