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Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Topical – Sport

Using Sports to “Build It Up” or “Wash It down”: How Sportswashing Give Sports a Bad Name

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Abstract

As society evolves, sports have become a vital social function and interactive means in our modern society. This essay addresses a few recent sport news stories that ignites the discussion of “sportswashing.” The authors illustrated several news cases and examples of governments and organizations using sports to cover up inhumane acts, scandals, or controversies for political purposes and power control. The primary intent of this essay is to help readers be aware of this social trend and inspire all to make ethical and good judgement in decision-making.

Keywords: Sport-for-development, sportswashing, international sports, LIV golf, and Olympics Games

As society evolves, sports have become a vital social function and interactive means in our modern society. Scholars and experts have encouraged the utilization of sport-for-development (SFD) or sport-for-peace-development (SPD) initiatives to address and combat social issues, such as intergroup relations, public health, crime, and homelessness (Cunningham, 2019). It is believed that sports can bring positive influence for enhancing public health, socialization of children, social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, economic development of regions and states, cultural integration, and conflict resolution (Cunningham, 2019; Sage et al., 2019; Welty Peachey et al., 2018). However, when government and sport agencies try to utilize sports to carry out those aforementioned positive outcomes, their intent and practices are not often considered honest and noble. Recently, several studies and reports indicated while the regime of Saudi Arabia aggressively engaged in sport initiatives for development and social changes, there could have also been ill-intended “sportswashing” schemes behind the scenes to cover up the human-rights violations or corruptions (Zidan, 2019).

This essay attempts to address a few recent sport news stories that ignites the discussion of “sportswashing.” In 2015, the Sports for Rights campaign used the term “sportswashing” to expose Azerbaijan’s distraction from their poor human rights record by hosting the European Games (Slattery, 2018). Then the term was popularized in 2018 by Amnesty International as the organization accused Manchester City’s ownership of enhancing the Abu Dhabi royal family’s problematic image through the sponsorship of sporting ventures (Watson, 2018). Since sports have become a critical means for enhancing social change and development in the society, the authors wish to reiterate the importance of examining the intent and practices for conducting events and promotions. All sport administrators and future employees (students) need to remember the fundamental essence of keeping a moral compass, because every decision comes with consequences.

Problems and Concerns Associated with Sportswashing

Since 2016, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman had ordered the kingdom’s General Sports Authority to set up a Sports Development Fund to privatize football clubs for participation growth, promote new sports events, and add 40,000 jobs to the economic marketplace (Zidan, 2019). This visionary plan was supposed to help develop a modern and technocratic Saudi Arabia for the future. Within the last six years, the Saudi Arabian

kingdom has hosted multiple motorsport events, World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) and boxing matches, and a Professional Golf Association (PGA) European Tour golf event. The kingdom’s foundation even sponsored the Aramco Team Series to promote female golf competitions and champion for gender equality (Aramco Team Series, n.d.).

It is very common to see many of the Middle East kingdoms, such as Qatar and Bahrain utilize sports as a means to develop the nation’s economy, culture, and national image (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Roussel, 2021; Søyland, 2020). However, critics have questioned these liberal changes and the kingdoms’ sudden interest in sports. In fact, these changes and activities are viewed as a soft power tactic to distract public attention from Saudi Arabia’s ongoing human rights abuses (i.e., the attack in Yemen by Saudi-led coalition and the murder of the journalist, Jamal Khashoggi) (Zidan, 2019 and 2022). Critics also denounced Qatar and Bahrain for engaging in sportswashing despite their effort in promoting sports and changes (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2015; Roussel, 2021; Søyland, 2020).

LIV Golf International a newly formed professional golf series that is sponsored by Saudi Arabia’s sovereign-wealth fund. The Saudi Arabian government pledged \$400 million to start this league with 54 holes in each of the tournament (which the Roman numeral LIV stands for) (Mullin, 2022). In early June 2022, the PGA suspended 17 members for participating in the LIV Golf London event (D’Angelo, 2022). Furthermore, the DP World Tour also decided to ban and fine several famous golfers, including Sergio Garcia and Ian Poulter from three future PGA sponsored tournaments for their participation in the LIV Golf London event in June 2022 (Zak, 2022). LIV Golf has offered substantial purses and undisclosed appearance fees to lure players joining in (D’Angelo, 2022). According to Kampmark (2022), the famous Hall of Fame golfer, Greg Norman, the Chief Executive, of LIV Golf London, has been described as an ambassador of Saudi Arabia’s sportswashing scheme. The league has become notorious for aggressively recruiting rookie members with exorbitant amounts of money and challenging the contract system established by the existing leagues (Stricklin, 2022). Although the participants were suspended for the reason of joining in this newly formed Saudi Arabia funded league without properly requesting the PGA and other tours’ permission, some suspended players criticized they were unfairly targeted for playing in a rivalry league for better prizes and being a scapegoat of the regime’s sportswashing scheme (D’Angelo, 2022; Zak, 2022).



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In 2015, the Sports for Rights campaign used the term “sportswashing” to expose Azerbaijan’s distraction from their poor human rights record by hosting the European Games (Slattery, 2018). Then the term was popularized in 2018 by Amnesty International as the organization accused Manchester City’s ownership of enhancing the Abu Dhabi royal family’s problematic image through the sponsorship of sporting ventures (Watson, 2018). Today, sportswashing is described as the usage of sport as propaganda to manipulate soft power coercion, nationalist-invoking stratagems, and the methods for covering political scandals and problems (Difato, 2021). In terms of the manipulation of soft power through sports, traditionally the literature focused on the Olympic Games as the standard model. Recently, the awareness of sportswashing has garnered the attention of examining the relationships between politics and sports; however, the topic is still in its academic infancy (Difato, 2021; Levermore & Budd, 2009). Scholars warned us the use of sportswashing is a much more complex topic than hosting country using sports to improve Gross Domestic Productions (GDPs) or international image once every four years. States burdened with negative national images or stereotypes often have more to gain from mobilizing soft power to change their image (Difato, 2021). The examples of sportswashing are evident throughout the history of humankind. The authors presented several notorious incidents suggested by scholars and reporters in Table 1. The most recent and controversial case may be China’s 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing. This mega-event supposes to be the symbolic presentation of world peace and unity. Yet, the Chinese government has been criticized for its inhumane internment of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region, political oppression over Hong Kong and neighboring Taiwan, and the disappearance of tennis star Peng Shuai (after accusing a Chinese official of sexual assault) (Dooley, 2022; Zidan, 2022).

Table 1. Examples of Sportswashing in history

Year	Incident
1335 B.C.	1335-BC when Egyptian superiority over the subjugated Nubians was dramatized for the Pharaoh’s entertainment [1] in the form of wrestling tournaments which would be depicted in tombs to demonstrate the Pharaoh’s strength (Difato, 2021)
1936	During the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, Hitler and his Nazi regime hosted the event and attempted to showcase German and Aryan superiority (Zidan, 2022).

1978	Argentina hosted the 1978 FIFA World Cup to launder the country’s reputation due to a poor human rights record. The unstable government supported by a military coup committed a serious atrocity to stay in power (Ellis, 2020).
2016	Brazil’s government was criticized for neglecting unemployment, high inflation and environmental problems while hosting 2016 Rio Olympics (Boykoff & Mascarenhas, 2016).
2010s	Autocratic leader of Chechen, Ramzan Kadyrov, had employed mixed martial arts (MMA) as an extension of the government in the North Caucasus to execute the brand of sportswashing and soft power manipulation (Difato, 2021; Zidan, 2017).
2018	The 2018 World Cup in Russia was viewed as a distraction from Vladimir Putin’s unsavory rule. The country was criticized due to its use of forced labor in building the stadiums, its poor record on LGBT rights, and attack in Crimea (Ellis, 2020; Worden, 2018).
2019	The 2019 Europa Final held in Baku was criticized on grounds of sportswashing by the Azerbaijani government (Anon, 2019).
2022	China hosted the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing despite all types of criticisms of its human rights violation. (i.e., inhumane internment of Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region, political oppression over Hong Kong and neighboring Taiwan, and the disappearance of tennis star Peng Shuai (Dooley, 2022; Zidan, 2022).

The use of sport diplomacy has become common public diplomacy in a globalized society as nations engaging with other foreign actors since the cold war era. Nobel laureate and former South Africa President, Nelson Mandela was a strong believer that sports can change the world for the better. However, critics also worry that numerous regimes just used sports for their own selfish ambitions (Kobierecki, & Strozek, 2020; Korneeva, 2016; Lenskyj, 2020). Many dictators value sport so much due to its multi-dimensional application for competing against their rivalries in a peaceful manner while also changing their global image through mega-events such as the Olympics (Difato, 2021). Today people can witness a prevalent increase of sportswashing cases as nations and non-state actors use newer sportive initiatives to execute their

diplomatic policies and socio-political agenda (Korneeva, 2016).

As the authors (we) discuss the phenomenon of sportswashing, there are two unique concerns that deserve extra attention for examination. Although it is important to understand the concept in order to safeguard against the regimes' corrupt intent, would it be fair to say the benefits of sportswashing can be overstated? It makes people wonder if wealthy authoritarian countries simply focus too much on positive aspects of sport for development and neglect the potential consequence brought by the short-sighted view of sportswashing. Do people really fixate on the temporary economic benefits and enhancement of global reputations and forget about the regime's violations of human rights and other immoral conducts? Furthermore, the public may detest the notion of sportswashing and think governments that deploy such practices are treacherous and horrible. However, the public often do not bring the same weight of criticism or protest toward all sportswashing cases after all. It is clear that many royal regimes of the Muslim world or developmental third-world countries have been heavily condemned for their sportswashing scheme. In Qatar's defense, the death of migrant workers for building the World Cup facilities are unintended and unexpected accidents (Difato, 2021). The nation did not deliberately intend to deceive, mislead, or divert, yet the nation is easily being labeled with a sportswashing tag. In the meantime, when nations such as China and Russia with strong military presence and much economic influence and power commit sportswashing practices, there are far less criticism and sanctions around. When the Chinese Communist Party vehemently denied the allegations of violating Uyghur Muslims' human rights, most of the corporate sponsors or nations did not stop participating in the 2022 Winter Olympics (Dooley, 2022). Perhaps like any other political issues, when there is more economy and power involved, the case of right and wrong does not seem to be so important anymore. More interestingly, there is certainly no condemnation of British or American agencies committing acts of sportswashing. Yet, the Premier League has been used as part of British trade missions (Difato, 2021; Grix, & Houlihan, 2014). The National Football League's new partnership deal with China (pushing the false narrative that Taiwan is a part of China) and the NBA's blossoming business relationship with Rwandan autocrat Paul Kagame certainly fit the sportswashing profile (Zidan, 2022). It makes people wonder if different cultural lens or standards are being used to judge these issues.

Conclusions

International sporting federations are increasingly facing the challenges of making judicial decisions to avoid allegations of Human Rights violations. In addition, several examples of forced eviction, violations of freedom of speech, and abuses inflicted upon migrant construction workers have plagued the sport world (Marya & Tandon, 2020). It is apparent that sporting events can be viewed as a double-edged sword. With proper planning and goodwill, sports can help a nation, or an organization shape the culture, develop local economy, and catapult one's international image. On the other hand, sports can also be employed by the autocratic rulers as a disguise to hide wrongdoing, scandals, and corruption, manipulate false image, sideline the critics, and create nostalgic distraction. Athletes, event planners, sponsors, and even spectators of all kinds are likely to face a dilemma. Is it worth the risk to partake the event sponsored by the host that is accused of sportswashing (Fong, 2008)? Perhaps people all need to remind each other that every action one takes will come with a consequence regardless of participation or non-participation. There may be different standards or opinions to judge a leader or an administrator's intention and decision. One may also have various reasons (i.e. growing economy, building reputation, obtaining personal fame, pacifying public anger, or avoiding troubles) to justify why certain thoughts and decisions are made. However, there must be proper and righteous ways to carry out a decision by not sabotaging the rights and wellbeing of politically oppressed and underprivileged people or concealing the honest intention of acts.

In order to better understand sportswashing' purpose and impact, it is necessary for individuals to understand the soft power and ability that governments must achieve in building a good image and political goals through "peaceful" means, such as culture, art, and sports (Hernández Liborio, 2022). Sport administrators and future researchers would need to educate themselves in areas such as personal ethics, history and politics, diversity training and critical thinking to be sensitive and develop self-awareness for complicated social issues. Sports leaders should actively engage in discussions, listen to different opinions, and differentiate the truths and incorrect information (fake news). The authors sincerely hope the aforementioned topics and cases would encourage readers to remember one important thing that individuals must choose to uphold high moral and

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ethical standards while executing decisions and be prepared to face the consequence bravely. After all, our own actions and decisions could be challenged and put to test one day, because truth, honesty, qualities of work are the ultimate elements that will last and prevail and be critiqued and remembered by others.

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