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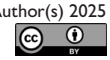

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Demystifying sportswashing: An assemblage theory perspective on authoritarian states' investment in global sport

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Abstract

The article makes an original and significant contribution to international relations in three notable ways. First, we show that international relations scholars should exercise caution in their use of 'sportswashing', a term that has swiftly grown in popularity to detail the process through which non-democratic states invest in sport to distract global audiences away from their illegitimate or immoral practices. In heavily critiquing the term, we expose four of sportswashing's inherent weaknesses and fallacies. Second, we draw on assemblage theory to demonstrate that this process does not revolve around image politics alone (as sportswashing suggests) but is rather the result of a much broader set of mutual motivations and interests that exist between multiple stakeholders. Third, we advance what we term 'sportsdirtying', to demonstrate how, in fact, investment in sport inherently leads to a heightening of public awareness and critique of an authoritarian state's socio-political issues.

Keywords

assemblage theory, authoritarianism, global sport, Saudi Arabia, sportswashing, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Authoritarian states can generally be characterised as a type of governance system whereby there is an absence of free democratic voting processes, leading, in many cases, to a lack of civil liberties, freedom of expression, and the right to association (see Glasius, 2018). Despite this, authoritarian states continue to act as significant actors within international relations. Note, for example, the leading role played by Saudi Arabia in global

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energy supplies, the small state of Qatar's position as a vital mediator of global conflicts, or China's place as a key infrastructure financier and developer across South Asia, Africa, and Europe, largely via its 'Belt and Road Initiative' (see also Demirbas et al., 2016; Kamrava, 2011; Zhao and Tan-Mullins, 2021). A further way in which authoritarian states play a vital role within international affairs is through their increasing investment in global sport. Evidence of this lies in the way these states have come to dominate the staging of arguably the planet's three largest events, the Summer Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and the Winter Olympic Games. Examples include Russia's staging of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games and the 2018 FIFA World Cup; China's hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games and the 2022 Winter Olympics; the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar; and the forthcoming 2034 FIFA World Cup, to be organised by Saudi Arabia. In addition, there has been an increasing trend of authoritarian states strategically investing in key British and European sporting markets (see also Webber, 2024). This has largely taken the form of either sports sponsorship or the purchasing of high-profile sporting brands: on the latter, take, for instance, the Abu Dhabi United Group's purchase of Manchester City FC in 2008, the Qatar Investment Authority's 2011 takeover of the French Ligue 1 club Paris Saint-Germain, and the 2021 acquisition of Newcastle United FC by Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund.

The growing popularity of the term 'sportswashing' can be understood as a response to the rise of these new, non-western sporting powers. Although lacking an agreed-upon definition, sportswashing commonly seeks to capture what Fruh et al. (2023: 103) denote as a 'fundamental dynamic at play': namely, the existence of a knowable moral violation, on the one hand, and the use of one's investment in sport as a 'valuable strategic vehicle' to shift attention away from this moral violation, on the other. Born out of the accompanying literature on 'greenwashing' and 'whitewashing', the 'washing' part of the term therefore refers to the strategic attempt of state leaders to attach themselves and their nations to the positive, clean, and wholesome ideals of elite sport, and in doing so, 'to wash off negative associations with problems such as environmental degradation and human rights abuses' (Canniford and Hill, 2022). However, as Skey (2023: 760) correctly pinpoints, while greenwashing and whitewashing denote ideas of concealment or cover up, sportswashing rather draws attention to the way 'connections with sports are used in processes of consociation and deflection'. Commonly used by academics and journalists alike in their assessment of non-democratic states, sportswashing thus denotes the process of deliberately investing in sport to *distract* or *deflect* attention away from one's illegitimate or immoral practices, policies and/or values (see also Ettinger, 2023). Sportswashing should therefore be considered a part of the broader practice of national reputation management, and the associated attempt of national leaders to improve their state's image in the eyes of international audiences.

On the back of the growing popularity of the term sportswashing, in this article we make an original and significant contribution to international relations in three key respects. First, we show that international relations scholars should exercise caution in their use of the term sportswashing, as it fails to capture the full complexity involved in authoritarian states' strategic investment in sport. In doing so, in the next section, we unpack the term's key flaws by pinpointing four notable weaknesses and inaccuracies. Second, having critiqued the use of the term sportswashing, we then go on to argue that this novel trend within international relations can be more accurately and rigorously explained by drawing on the use of assemblage theory. As we detail in our main section, an assemblage theory perspective crucially shows that this process does not revolve

around national reputation management alone (as sportswashing suggests) but is rather the result of a much broader set of mutual motivations and interests that exist between multiple stakeholders. To evidence this, we offer the first assemblage theory analysis of authoritarian states' investment in sport. We do so by focusing on two notable case studies: the Abu Dhabi United Group's investment into Manchester City FC and the UK city of Manchester; and Saudi Arabia's staging of numerous high-profile – predominantly British and European – sports events. Finally, in our penultimate section, we advance what we term 'sportsdirtying', to demonstrate how, in fact, investment in sport inherently leads to a heightening of public awareness and critique of an authoritarian state's socio-political issues. Our article will strongly appeal to those interested in the international relations of sport, leisure, events, and other cultural spheres, as well as those engaged in the global politics and foreign policy analysis of authoritarian states. We conclude by pinpointing the article's key theoretical and practical implications.

The problem with sportswashing

In recent years, the term sportswashing has been increasingly deployed by three key groups in their analysis of authoritarian state investment in global sport. One such group is *international non-governmental organisations*, who have sought to use the term to heighten awareness of authoritarian states' various shortcomings at home: examples include use of the term by Amnesty International (2023) in their evaluation of Saudi Arabia's staging of the 2023 FIFA Club World Cup, labelled as a case of 'blatant sportswashing', one that seeks to divert attention away from the state's 'atrocious human rights record'. Similarly, Human Rights Watch (2024a) have argued that Saudi Arabia's purchasing of numerous high-profile athletes to its Saudi Pro League – including the Portugal and former-Real Madrid forward, Cristiano Ronaldo – equates to the desire of the state to not comply 'with their human rights obligations', but instead attempt to 'whitewash or sportswash their reputation'. A second group in this regard is the *global media* who have deployed the term in their commentary and analysis on the politics of sport: examples here include The Independent's (2019) assessment of Manchester City FC under the ownership of the Abu Dhabi United Group as 'a "sportswashing instrument" of a foreign state'; while The Guardian (2023b) has branded Qatar's staging of the 2022 World Cup as 'a sportswashing high point', one that sought to cover up 'the host's poor human rights record'. Finally, the third is the emerging group of *academics and other critical commentators*, who have either set out to challenge, critique, and advance sportswashing from a theoretical and/or practical perspective (see, for example: Boykoff, 2022; Delaney, 2024; Fruh et al., 2023; Skey, 2023; Grix et al., 2023; Grix and Brannagan, 2024); or have endeavoured to apply sportswashing to specific case studies without first questioning the term's conceptual and practical underpinnings (see, for example, Davis et al., 2023; Kearns et al., 2024).

Despite the evidential popularity of the term, we urge scholars of international relations to exercise caution in deploying sportswashing in their analyses of authoritarian state investment into sport. As we argue in this section, this is because inherent within the term are four notable flaws. The first is that the term 'sportswashing' is a misnomer. That is to say, the notion that any state's investment in a sports team or event will automatically distract attention away from its various political or social problems is contrary to the evidence. Indeed, all states who invest in the staging of a major sports event such as an Olympic Games or FIFA World Cup receive some form of international scrutiny, which

in turn actually heightens public awareness of the host's wrongdoings. Take, for example, Qatar's staging of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and the way the tournament significantly increased global knowledge of the state's human rights abuses (see Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2018, 2023; Brannagan et al., 2025). Led by the global media and various international non-governmental organisations, notable here was the global criticism the state received for the inadequate treatment of its expatriate blue-collar workforce, with claims that those working within Qatar's construction sector (including on World Cup-related projects) were being subjected to substandard living and working conditions, resulting in thousands of migrant worker deaths (see Human Rights Watch, 2022). Similarly, a state's purchase of a professional sports team usually leads to increased public debate on the integrity of the investor: note, for instance, the Saudi Arabia Public Investment Fund's drawn-out purchase of Newcastle United F.C., and the associated debate that ensued over the suitability of the deal, focusing in particular on the alleged Saudi-backed assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, along with the state's continued illegal piracy of sports broadcasting across the Middle East (see BBC, 2021). In both cases, and as we demonstrate in our penultimate section, rather than 'sportswashing', a more appropriate term might be 'sportsdirtying', as investment in sport fails to do much 'washing', but in contrast leads to heightened public critique of the investor state's socio-political issues at home.

Second, sportswashing treats the investor state as a predictable, intellectual dupe. Sportswashing is commonly deployed to refer to a non-democratic, authoritarian state investing in sport in the hope that, by doing so, global publics will be distracted away from their immoral practices at home. Not only is this premise based on an incorrect hypothesis about the potential of sport in this regard (as detailed above), but it also automatically assumes that the investor state is aimlessly unaware of the risks that accompany such an investment. This is, we argue, unrealistic for two reasons: on the one hand, has been the exponential growth of international non-governmental organisations (see Lewis et al., 2020), who, in collaboration with the media, have come to act as a type of global police for issues linked to human rights, environmentalism, and international law, and in doing so, have sought to enforce national compliance by raising the level of public scrutiny levied towards national leaders; while, on the other hand, has been the significant increase in the amount of public relations agencies, media managers, and marketing consultants who are today employed by political leaders to manage their state's image, and to advise on potential investment opportunities (see, for example: Bolin and Miazhevich, 2018). The result of these twin processes is that state leaders are, perhaps more than ever, reminded of the potential risks to their own, and their state's, image.

Third, sportswashing focuses attention on only one part of this phenomena: the investor state. Along with making inaccurate assumptions on why the investor invests in sport in the first place, the literature also fails to appreciate that an investor state cannot sportswash on its own, but that this process also requires a compliant investee. Indeed, regardless of the investor's motivations in investing in sport, it is important to locate that this investment greatly benefits others and is therefore a reciprocal relationship between different sets of actors: take once again the 2022 World Cup, which not only sought to benefit Qatar as the investor state – be that in terms of tourism or foreign policy gains – but so too FIFA, who earned an additional £1 billion compared to the 2018 edition (hosted by Russia), taking its total earnings to £7.5 billion (see The Guardian, 2022c); similarly, and as we discuss in detail below, note how the Abu Dhabi United Group's purchase of Manchester City FC has not only furthered the interests of the Emirati state, but so too the

city of Manchester, with the latter receiving more than £1 billion of investment from the former for the construction of non-sporting infrastructure (see The Guardian, 2022d).

Finally, sportswashing narrows the focus of investigation to matters of national reputation management. That is, by allegedly attempting to distract publics away from their problems at home, sportswashing assumes that the investor state is investing in sport to simply improve their image, and thus excludes alternative motivations. While it may be impossible to know the real motivations of any investor, previous research on state investment into sport has pointed to a much broader set of underlying motivations, including works published on authoritarian states such as Qatar (see Brannagan and Rookwood, 2016; Brannagan and Reiche, 2022), Saudi Arabia (see Albujulaya et al., 2023; Ettinger, 2023; Brannagan and Reiche 2025), the United Arab Emirates (see Koch, 2020), Russia (see Müller, 2017; Grix et al., 2019), and China (see McLeod et al., 2018). Furthermore, we recognise that many of the so-called 'sportswashing' instances in sport – such as state investment into various professional sports teams – are initiated by national sovereign wealth funds, whose central role is to strategically invest in overseas ventures for the benefit of long-term financial gain. This, we argue, suggests there is at the very least some economic motivation involved in this process.

As detailed in the introduction, one of the key arguments this article makes is that the term sportswashing is not fit for purpose. In this section, we have shown this by pinpointing how sportswashing's existence rests on *four inaccurate assumptions*: that investment in sport distracts attention away from an investor's problems; that the investor is oblivious to the risks; that sportswashing is a one-way process; and that this process is motivated by reputation politics alone. Having identified these inaccuracies, in the next section, we seek to present a more accurate and rigorous account of the motivations underpinning authoritarian states' investments into sports clubs, leagues, and events. We do so by suggesting that this process is not solely concerned with the promotion or management of the investor's image, let alone the alleged desire to distract international publics, but rather a much broader set of objectives that can be more rigorously analysed through the use of assemblage theory.

Assemblage theory

Assemblage theory is a concept that originates within philosophical domains (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) and that follows a long tradition of relational theories. Within the boundaries of this study, we concentrate on the specific application of assemblage thinking to the disciplines of international relations and foreign policy analysis. An 'assemblage' denotes the ordering and coming together of multiple heterogeneous parts or entities, not exclusively focusing on their aggregation, but more importantly on the nature of the interactions between these entities (Savage, 2020). In the process of doing so, these joined entities come to form a whole, which lasts for varied periods of time, creating new territories that stretch across spatiotemporal divides (Bueger, 2018; Müller, 2015). When mutual attraction peaks among these entities, we see the formations of 'basins of attraction', anchoring the assemblage around valued goals. Basins of attraction are deep points of convergence that force the assemblage to reterritorialise around 'highly-valued' opportunities, objectives, and outcomes (Turner et al., 2022). Rooted within the concept that the formation of assemblages presents both limitations and opportunities for the whole, we posit the concept of basins of attraction as a central theoretical tool to demystify sportswashing. Indeed, within the domain of international relations, assemblage theory is

concerned with explaining 'why orders emerge in particular ways, [and] how they hold together' along with 'how they reach across or mould space and how they fall apart' (Müller, 2015: 27). Therefore, assemblage theory is, we would argue, well placed to help more rigorously explain the phenomena currently labelled as 'sportswashing'.

For this analysis, the purpose is not to offer a detailed overview of assemblage theory, but rather to purposefully take into account three distinct features of assemblage thinking that we feel advance a more accurate understanding of the phenomenon currently labelled as sportswashing. First, assemblages are necessarily *relational*. They ontologically form when two or more apparently distinct constituent parts enter in connection to create a 'new' agential whole. From an international relations perspective, a constituent part in this regard may include nation-states, intergovernmental organisations, multinational corporations, buildings, geography, environmental disasters, wars, international policies and treaties, or public opinion. As these constituent parts form temporary connections to create new agency for the whole, the getting together of these social, spatial, and ultimately ontological constituents is a complex process that is often reduced to simple terms for general understanding (Jessop et al., 2008), with the term 'sportswashing', as we explained, presenting a prime example of the drawbacks of such reductionism. Indeed, assemblage theory helps us advance the idea that 'sportswashing' needs demystification, intended as the rejection of essential features that currently describe and define the term.

Second, given the dynamic nature of assemblages, they are in a constant *state of emergence.* Assemblages originate from the emergence of provisional unities from specific context and conditions (Anderson et al., 2012). An assemblage's stability, therefore, depends on the ongoing 'territorialisation' or 'deterritorialisation' of these temporary unities. Both processes increase or decrease stability through different degrees of homogenisation and heterogenisation. Stronger relations emerge when parts align around shared visions and interests (Briassoulis, 2019; Müller and Schurr, 2016). This distinct feature of assemblages in international relations implies a rejection of essentialism (DeLanda, 2006; Harman, 2008), moving away from reified generalities and abstract concepts (Acuto and Curtis, 2014; Harman, 2014). Specifically, the anti-essentialism of assemblage theory refers to a rejection of fixed and static characteristics of a given assembled entity. Indeed, territorialised unities form the contextual, empirical, and emergent basis to understand any assemblage. The concept of 'sportswashing' can fall under such critiqued essentialism, as its ambiguous conceptualisation is, so far, not rooted in contextual and emergent properties. Instead, it is rooted in reified and static characteristics, spurring the ongoing scholarly attempts to disassemble this concept and understand its properties and capacities. Properties and capacities, within the context of anti-essentialism, refer specifically to the emergent qualities of any given assemblage, which arise from the specific interactions and relations of the entities within the assemblage (DeLanda, 2006).

Third, assemblages are *productive*. As assemblages form, they also come to produce novel outcomes, such as the sharing of particular forms of wealth, knowledge, labour, materials, and resources (McFarlane, 2009). This, in turn, produces new conceptual territories and new realities, accompanied by new actors, new behaviours, new patterns of activity, new meanings, and new forms of politics, governance, influence, and authority (see Abrahamsen and Williams, 2009; Bueger, 2018; Müller, 2015). It is because of this that McFarlane (2009: 565) advocates that, within any assemblage, there is always 'the possibility of different forms of power operating simultaneously . . . across different sites in ways that problematise analytic divisions like global-local, or state-civil society'.

Existing research shows how such power also operates within and through the domain of sport (Andrews, 2019; Posbergh et al., 2023).

Following the idea that assemblages are relational, emergent, and productive, we now apply assemblage theory to two authoritarian state's investment in sport. We do so to show that these investments are the result of a broad set of mutual motivations and interests between multiple stakeholders and are not a simple attempt for the advancement of image politics (as sportswashing implies). To show this, we focus on two case studies: the Abu Dhabi United Group's investment into Manchester City FC and the UK city of Manchester; and Saudi Arabia's staging of numerous high-profile sporting events. Our decision to focus on these specific cases is underpinned by the fact they provide contrasting examples of authoritarian investment into sport: indeed, our first case study showcases an authoritarian state using sport to invest in a particular overseas territory (namely Manchester), while the other demonstrates the attempt of an authoritarian state to attract global (sporting) events inward. Furthermore, as detailed in the previous section, both case studies have previously been highlighted by academics and journalists alike as examples of sportswashing and thus provide a useful form of comparison in our treatment of them from an assemblage theory perspective.

Case Study 1: The Abu Dhabi Untied Group and Manchester City FC

Context

The Abu Dhabi United Group is technically an Abu Dhabi-based private equity company, formed in 2008. However, as is the case with many authoritarian states, there is an unclear distinction between private and state wealth, namely because many royal family members who occupy leading political roles – and thus have access to large sums of national wealth – are also in control of, or own, some of their state's leading corporations, 'private' investment funds, and national banks. A notable example of this is the founder and owner of the Abu Dhabi United Group, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan: as a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, he serves as the Vice President and Deputy Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, is the Chairman of the United Arab Emirates' two sovereign wealth funds, and is a board member of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, the Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank, and the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company, respectively (Reuters, 2023a; The Guardian, 2021a). The evidential close ties between Shiekh Mansour, the Emirati and Abu Dhabi royal families, and the central organisations of national wealth has led to claims that the Abu Dhabi United Group is funded by – and should therefore be seen as a direct extension of – the United Arab Emirates (see The Guardian, 2022e).

In 2008, the Abu Dhabi United Group purchased the English Premier League club Manchester City FC for a total of £200 million (BBC, 2018). At the time, Manchester City FC was a mid-table club experiencing significant financial turmoil, as then-owner and former-Prime Minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra, had purchased the club in 2007, only then to have his assets frozen by Thai authorities over allegations of corruption and abuses of power (see BBC, 2008). Since the takeover by the Abu Dhabi United Group, Manchester City FC has been transformed into a global football powerhouse, with the club winning 8 Premier League titles, 3 FA Cups, 6 League Cups, 1 Champions League, and 1 FIFA Club World Cup. Five years after the purchase of Manchester City FC, in 2013 the Abu Dhabi United Group created City Football Group to act as its

strategic investment arm into elite sport, and particularly football. Since then, City Football Group has gone on to secure full or majority shares in multiple professional football club's from across the globe, including New York City FC (U.S.), Melbourne City (Australia), Yokohama F Marinos (Japan), Montevideo City Torque (Uruguay), Girona (Spain), Sichuan Jiuniu (China), Mumbai City (India), Palermo FC (Italy), Lommel SK (Belgium), Troyes (France), and Bahia (Brazil) (see The Guardian, 2023a).

In the years following the Manchester City FC takeover, the Abu Dhabi United Group set about extending its strategic sporting investments. In 2011, the City of Manchester Stadium, Manchester City FC's home ground, was renamed the Etihad Stadium, after Etihad Airways – Abu Dhabi's national flag carrier – paid £35 million per year for a 10-year deal. Before the deal could be finalised, Manchester City Council were required to formally approve the change in name, as it is they who lease the stadium to Manchester City FC and its owners, with the stadium originally built for Manchester's hosting of the 2002 Commonwealth Games (BBC, 2011b). To fulfil this agreement, the Abu Dhabi United Group agreed to double its annual payments to Manchester City Council from £2 million to £4 million per year in exchange for naming rights to the stadium (The Guardian, 2011b). This influx of additional capital came at a time when Manchester City Council announced they were being forced to make 2000 job losses and budgetary savings of £170 million due to national government cuts (The Guardian, 2011c).

In 2011, the Abu Dhabi United Group then submitted planning permission for the proposed £200 million construction of an 80-acre training campus. In late 2011, this was subsequently approved by Manchester City Council (see BBC, 2011a). The campus – known as the 'Etihad Campus' – was to be located adjacent to the Etihad Stadium, in an area of east Manchester the Council had been keen to improve for years, and which, at the time, consisted of neighbourhoods that were among Britain's most deprived 1% (The Guardian, 2011a). Completed in 2014, the new training campus featured 16 full-sized football pitches, bespoke indoor training facilities, a 120-seat press conference theatre, a hydrotherapy facility, a 56-seat TV auditorium, 4 star player accommodation, and a 7000-seater stadium, intended to be used for competitive academy and women's matches (BBC, 2014; The Guardian, 2014). The Abu Dhabi United Group also donated 5.5 acres of campus land for the construction of the new Connell Sixth Form College, a further education institution whose students benefit from access to the campus's training facilities, and a place whereby Manchester City FC can conveniently send its academy pupils (Manchester Evening News, 2023a). In 2020, Abu Dhabi United Group-subsidiary, City Football Group, then announced it would be part-funding the extension of the Etihad Campus to include the construction of Co-op Live, the UK's largest indoor arena (Manchester Evening News, 2023b).

It was however in 2014 where this assemblage started to reterritorialise from a purely sports-related assemblage into a much broader assemblage, one that generated new possibilities and outcomes. Having showcased the level of investment Manchester City's owners were willing to make, in 2014 Manchester City Council announced the launch of 'Manchester Life', a partnership between the Council and the Abu Dhabi United Group to invest £1 billion over 10 years into the construction of new homes (The Guardian, 2022d). The project includes the Council transferring public land in Manchester to the Abu Dhabi United Group for the development of residential housing as part of a long-term profit-sharing scheme (see Goulding et al., 2024). Since the announcement of the Manchester Life project, 1468 housing units have been developed across 9 sites, covering a total of 10.76 acres of land located in the rapidly gentrifying area of Ancoats, which lies

east of Manchester city centre. The vast majority of these sites consist of apartment blocks that are deliberately built to be privately rented or sold (Goulding et al., 2024).

Basins of attraction

We argue that the Abu Dhabi United Group-Manchester City FC partnership should be seen as an assemblage, one that is held together by the emergence of three key sets of mutual opportunities, or 'basins of attraction'. The first relates to an *economic basin of attraction*. This basin was formed by: on the one hand, the precarious economic situation of Manchester City FC in 2008; the ongoing poor financial condition of Manchester City Council, and the need to secure significant external investment; while, on the other hand, the desire of the Abu Dhabi United Group to invest in a major European football club, and the need for the United Arab Emirates hierarchy to continue to seek out, and benefit from, strategic economic opportunities in overseas markets, as part of an attempt to diversify their national economy away from a reliance on the sale of their natural resources, namely crude oil and natural gas (see also Brannagan and Reiche, 2022). While Manchester City Council has indeed benefitted from the inward investment needed for the construction of new infrastructure in previously deprived areas, it is the Abu Dhabi United Group that has arguably reaped the real financial benefit of this arrangement. Since purchasing the club in 2008 for £200 million, Manchester City FC's value has soared to nearly $4 billion and thus, for the Abu Dhabi United Group, the club acts as a valuable financial overseas investment that produces high returns (see Forbes, 2021). Furthermore, it has been reported that the public land entered into the Manchester Life project was sold to the Abu Dhabi United Group at a fraction of its true value, with the project now estimated to return £10 million per year in rental income, income that will be generated on a lease agreed by the Council and the Abu Dhabi United Group that lasts for a total of 10 centuries (Goulding et al., 2024; see also The Independent, 2022). Thus, contrary to accounts of sportswashing, which point to motivations of image politics alone, we argue that this assemblage does, in contrast, evidentially rest on the long-term financial interests of, in particular, Manchester City Council, the Abu Dhabi United Group, and the United Arab Emirates.

This assemblage also rests on a *political basin of attraction*. On the one hand, this basin has been formed by the regional power contest between the wealthiest states of the Arabian Gulf, all of whom are activity seeking to wield economic and political influence overseas – this is evident by the way the three largest Gulf economies, namely the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have all in recent decades built up a significant portfolio of international investments in key European cities, including the purchasing of some of Europe's most prestigious football clubs (see also Amar et al., 2022). This in turn provides these states with the opportunity to construct, take control of, and extend their networks of overseas political power, and in doing so, wield degrees of influence over key foreign sectors, critical infrastructure, and even policy decisions (see Drezner, 2008): on the latter, note, for example, how the Abu Dhabi United Group secured approval to change the name of the City of Manchester Stadium to the Etihad Stadium by agreeing to double their annual leasing payments to the Council. On the other hand, this also makes these Gulf states – and their associated wealth funds – attractive to local politicians themselves, not just when seeking to achieve their political mandates, but so too in furthering their personal interests: note, for example, Sir Richard Leese, who was a central figure behind the development of the Manchester Life project, and later was made an Honorary

President of Manchester City FC after stepping down as Leader of Manchester City Council in 2021, a position he had held since 1996 (Manchester City FC, 2023); or we may point to Sir Howard Bernstein, who was appointed as City Football Group's Strategic Development Advisor after serving as the Chief Executive of Manchester City Council from 1998 to 2017 (City Football Group, 2017).

This is not to suggest that image politics do not play a part within this assemblage. Indeed, this assemblage is also formed by an *identity basin of attraction*. However, whereas viewing this process as being led by the simple assumption that an authoritarian state's investment into a football club will automatically distract audiences away from its problems, as is the case with sportswashing, we instead argue that such an investment can result in *both* negative and positive forms of image politics over time. The negative side of this process we term 'sportsdirtying', which we discuss in detail in later sections. On the more positive side, note, for example, the praise Manchester City FC has received for its notable on-field success, and the way the club has – thanks largely to the Abu Dhabi United Group – come to dominant English football. Crucially, such success has not distracted attention away from the United Arab Emirates' problems, but, to the contrary, accusations of sportswashing have emerged out of this very success (see, for example, BBC, 2023). Nonetheless, such achievements have resulted in any negative reports of this investment being accompanied by more positive accounts, and a genuine affinity has subsequently emerged between Manchester City FC's fanbase and the club's owners (see Kearns et al., 2024). The mutually beneficial nature of this assemblage is further evident in the way Manchester City FC's success has also come to act as symbol of pride for the City of Manchester itself, as it seeks to brand itself as a 'world renowned sporting city', and thus a key destination for leisure and cultural tourism (see Manchester City Council, n.d.).

Case Study 2: Saudi Arabia as a global sports destination

Context

Saudi Arabia, officially known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is one of the most important states in the Gulf region and is seen as an ally to 'western' powers, such as the United Kingdom and the United States. As the second largest oil producer in the world, Saudi has built up an immense wealth and invests this via its sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which is one of the largest wealth funds in the world (Reuters, 2023b). The PIF is controlled by its Chair, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who is also the Prime Minister of Saudi and effectively the ruler of the Kingdom, despite the fact that his father, Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz, is still alive. The Crown Prince, known as 'MBS', rose to take this leading position after a 'crackdown' of perceived rivals (see The Washington Post, 2017). Since 2016, MBS has spearheaded the Kingdom's investment in European sport, making a number of major investments in sport leagues and clubs, sports events, and sports sponsorship agreements, often for extravagant sums (see Ettinger, 2023, for an overview of all sports-related investments).

Our second case study differs slightly from the first in so far as the emphasis is not on the assemblage arrangements made by Saudia Arabia in external sports entities. Much has been written on the controversial investment by Saudi's Public Investment Fund in the UK's Premier League football club, Newcastle United (see Black et al., 2024; Ettinger, 2023; Roslender, 2024), and the massive investment in shaking up professional golf by launching the LIV Golf tour to rival the Professional Golf Association tour (Johnson,

2024; Jephson, 2024). Either of these developments could have served as a second case; however, both the Newcastle example – which mirrors much of what has been discussed in the previous case study – and the LIV case are investments made in sport outside of Saudi Arabia. The focus of this second case study is, instead, on how and why Saudi Arabia has acted as a magnet to internally draw in European professional sport to its own shores over the last decade, ostensibly, from its side, to create jobs, enhance the quality of life for its citizens, and showcase the nation. As we go on to show below, the other stakeholders in the assemblage are the multiple sports federations, such as boxing, Formula 1, golf, and FIFA, along with sports teams and athletes, all of whom also benefit greatly from this relationship.

Basins of attraction

We follow the same *basins of attraction* as above, that is, those linked to the mutual economic, political, and identity interests of the assemblage members. The *economic basin of attraction* for sports hosted in Saudi began to develop, even before the impetus of the Crown Prince, with the announcement of a deal to stage the first events of World Wrestling Entertainment in 2013 of a 10-year deal costing some $500 million (Ettinger, 2023). A few years later in 2016, the Crown Prince launched his Saudi Vision 2030 strategy to diversify the country's economy away from an over-reliance on gas and oil – incidentally, a 'vision' that has parallels in both Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE (see Reiche and Brannagan, 2022). Sport investment is seen as a core plank of this strategy and has led to a number of unprecedented shake-ups in the sporting world, the consequential nature of which we have yet to fully grasp. The latest example of this would be the Saudi attempt at developing a 'Saudi Boxing League', bringing together a wide array of stakeholders into an assemblage. This includes the disparate parts of boxing's organisation – with no less than four governing bodies – promoters, the media, and the boxers themselves in one tidy (Saudi-run) lucrative league. This follows several years of a key Saudi strategy, hosting a number of high-profile fights, including the blue-ribbon heavyweight championship title matches on its soil. Another recent sign of Saudi's influence on boxing is the hosting of the first women's world title fight in October, 2024 (BBC, 2024b). Boxing could be the next LIV golf. The Saudis are effectively bankrolling the 'merged' league (together with the Professional Golf Association) with a $2 billion investment, influencing both the league's format and where it is played. Crucially, they are investing in:

> Every monetizable implication of the PGA Tour's gargantuan operations, from signing media deals and licensing video games to drawing tournament revenues and running players clubs, [which] will generate profit for the two entities in charge of Newco – the PGA Tour and the PIF. The Saudis are not buying a golf tour, or even a golfer; they are capitalizing the game into a new commercial form (Yom, 2023).

Aside from the key investment in Newcastle United Football Club in 2021, Saudi Arabia has been driving an economic assemblage made of football stakeholders by hosting a foreign nation's cup tie, namely the Italian Super Cup since 2019. At first, the then leader of the small political party, Brothers of Italy, Georgia Meloni, decried the idea of effectively giving up such a national treasure. She called it 'an absolute disgrace' and went on to describe Saudi Arabia 'as a country that discriminates against women 'and our values' (The Guardian, 2024b). Since becoming Prime Minister, however, national sentiment has

given way to pragmatism, as Meloni, now an avid fan of Saudi Arabia, is involved in another assemblage, following a number of financial benefits for Italy in the form of cash and specific deals on the supply of energy from Saudi (The Guardian, 2024b). Likewise, the Spanish 'Super Cup' is being played in the Saudi capital Riyadh until 2029, with the Saudi's paying 30 million Euros for each year the game is played (Reuters, 2022). The President of the Spanish Football Association, Luis Rubiales, as a key part of the assemblage, 'defended playing in Saudi Arabia, saying the tournament was a way of generating income for some of LaLiga's more modest clubs' (Reuters, 2022). Overshadowing the hosting of another nation's 'Super Cup', but staying with football, is the targeted strategy of luring top-class footballers (many coming to the end of their careers) to play in the Saudi Pro League. In 2022, Cristiano Ronaldo signed a 2.5-year contract with Al Nassr FC, and the hope is his presence will increase attendance at games (The Guardian, 2022b). This was complemented by a number of other big-name signings, including Neymar, Karim Benzema, and N'Golo Kante (BBC, 2023).

The *politics basin of attraction* underlies the same rationale as that for the UAE case study above: a contest for regional power between the wealthiest states of the Arabian Gulf sees all of them seeking influence both abroad, but crucially at home. Of interest is the overlapping nature of the *politics* with the *economics basins of attraction*, for the majority of investee stakeholders in the assemblage do not seek power, but rather they wish to exchange cultural goods for economic resources. For example, whereas the Spanish Football Association welcomes a regular injection of cash to develop their league, the Saudis gain *power* through being part of this assemblage. To be clear, while the bi-directional relationship between Saudi Arabia and a multitude of sports stakeholders and politicians benefits all, it is likely that in the long term, the Saudis will extend their influence, national interests, and power in global sport (The Guardian, 2024b). Thus, such a sport investment strategy is not just an economic decision with which to secure the future; there is much more at play here for the long-term development of professional sport, if one state owns or co-owns a number of the world's most popular sports.

As mentioned, the Saudi 'Vision 2030' is not too dissimilar to both Qatar's and the UAE's policies. This suggests that the key states in the Gulf region are either learning from each other, or the 'drivers' behind their sport investment strategies are similar – or both. The internal drivers of sports investment strategies include, first, the need to counter rising levels of obesity and poor health in the region (Authors, 2024). The second is the fact that there is an urgent need to diversify and build a sustainable post-oil and gas economy, of which inward tourism through sport is a good example. Finally, the third 'driver' behind the Saudi, Qatari, and UAE sports investment strategies is domestic and regional security, as sport, sporting events, and sports power strengthens each state. By bringing world-class sport to its own country, Saudi Arabia is also attempting to appease citizens in a type of 'Bread and Circuses' manoeuvre practised by authoritarian regimes, one where the state effectively 'co-opts' its citizenry by providing very high living standards (including no tax on personal income) in exchange for political support and allegiance to the prevailing government (Azarieva et al., 2022).

While we note above that image enhancement was not the primary motive for the UAE's, Qatar's, or Saudi's vast investment in sport, it is clear that it *is* a long-term aim. The *identity basin of attraction* is at the centre of most reports on understanding Saudi's investment in sport. As mentioned, we understand this process to include *both* positive and negative forms of image politics over time. While we deal with the latter in this next section, on the former, a good example here would be the recent top-flight boxing matches

in Riyadh, where the majority of coverage focused on the sport itself and not on the venue or hosts (BBC, 2024a). A very interesting recent incident in boxing highlights the attempt by Saudi Arabia to convey the message to the world that it is becoming a key sporting host nation. The Saudis agreed to allow one of 'their' flag-ship 'Riyadh Season' boxing events to be held at Wembley, especially after many (predominantly Western) fans had complained about having to travel so far to see the fights (BBC, 2024). To underline that this was indeed a Saudi event, the Saudi national anthem was sung before the fight between two English boxers (Daniel Dubois and Anthony Joshua) in October 2024. The most vociferous defence of the Saudi-themed event in London came from two of the most powerful promoters in the boxing world, Frank Warren and Eddie Hearn, who, before Saudi investment in boxing, were considered arch rivals. The promoters, along with boxers, boxing governing bodies, and the Saudis, constitute a key part of the assemblage taking over the sport. Hearn remarked that His Excellency [Turki Alalshikh, who is in charge of Saudi's investment in boxing] is: 'A man who listened to the fight fans and went above and beyond to deliver for British fight fans who said they wanted to experience a Riyadh Season event' (BBC, 2024). The outspoken defence of Warren and Hearn – key members of the boxing assemblage – contrasted starkly with those who took umbrage at the fact that a Saudi-themed evening took place in an iconic British sporting venue (The Independent, 2024).

'Sportsdirtying'

As previously discussed, one of the key fallacies of sportswashing is that the term is a misnomer, with notions that a state's investment into a sport event or club will automatically distract global audience's attention away from its problems at home proving erroneous and running contrary to the evidence. Indeed, in most cases, the opposite is true, with investment in sport leading to a heightening of public critique. The more critique, the more public audiences become educated and made aware of the investor state's problems at home, which in turn, we argue, leads to the dirtying of the investor's international reputation. Consequently, a more accurate description of this process might be 'sportsdirtying', rather than 'sportswashing'. Having shown that authoritarian state investment in sport is being driven by motivations that stretch far beyond image politics alone, in this section, we endeavour to explain how sportsdirtying works.

We suggest sportsdirtying resonates with what Beck (2005) refers to as 'global domestic politics', denoting the process through which non-state actors seek to pressure national governments into action, change and transparency, by raising key questions over their ethical and moral credibility via the publication of various news articles, investigative reports, and/or league tables. The chief architects of global domestic politics are international non-governmental organisations, including human rights and environmental groups and civil societies, as well as the global media. As developments in informational technologies have advanced, these non-state actors have become increasingly efficient in the uncovering and dissemination of the (in)actions and practices of states and their leaders. An outcome of this is that, with these organisations gaining more sophisticated and effective operational control over the gathering, shaping and distribution of information, states do not simply compete with one another for reputational gains and losses, but so too with this extended array of non-state actors (see also Nye, 2011).

When engaging in global domestic politics, non-state actors tend to search out those incidents that occupy the greatest degree of controversy or scandal. For international

non-governmental organisations and the media, scandalous portrayals not only offer the most scathing blow to states' credibility, trustworthiness, and ultimately their reputations, but they also generate significant public interest and can thus effectively be used to pressure national leaders into domestic reform (see also Street, 2010). In doing so, non-state actors thus come to play a crucial role in the social construction of contemporary international politics. Indeed, as Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 6) note, in many cases, these non-states actors are powerful not because they possess certain material resources, but primarily 'because they use their authority to orient action and create social [political] reality'. Barnett and Finnemore call this 'social construction power', which seeks to encapsulate how non-state actors, by drawing on their knowledge and/or authority on certain issues – human rights, environmentalism, and so on – do not just come to pressure states into action, but so too do they *constitute* and *define* contemporary political norms, on what is considered to be 'acceptable', 'unacceptable', 'legitimate', or 'illegitimate' actions and behaviours. By framing specific issues, these non-state actors give meaning to domestic and international political issues, create new categories of actors, set priorities, and outline modes of acceptable, responsive action (Barnett and Finnemore, 2004).

In reputational terms, global domestic politics helps non-state actors bolster their own reputations by positioning themselves as crucial members of the international community. Important to remember is that the existence of many non-states actors is highly dependent on the perceived positive and progressive impact they have on contemporary politics. Indeed, as Barnett and Finnemore (2004: 1–2) note, most non-governmental organisations, for example, come to see themselves as a type of global 'civilian police', and in doing so, seek to get involved in almost every issue imaginable, be that related to human rights, animal welfare, environmentalism, or finance and trade; similarly, as others have noted, so too do the media actively look to symbolically position themselves as 'vital' members of international society, who are, above all else, motivated by the desire to serve the public interest and act as humanity's moral conscience (see Robertson, 2015). In this sense, non-state actors come to see themselves as representing various *community* interests, while the state, in opposition, is seen first-and-foremost to promote its own political *self-interest* (see Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). Consequently, we may speak of global domestic politics as a game of 'competitive strategic social construction', one where states and non-state actors constantly compete with each over the construction of 'acceptable' norms, ideas, agendas, and actions.

In the contemporary epoch, we argue that elite sport has emerged as one of the key battlefields in the contest over global domestic politics. This is for two reasons. First, unlike most industries, global sport creates significant public interest and sentiment. Indeed, the passion, loyalty, and emotion that accompanies global sport means it is an industry that is ripe for critical debates centred towards the moral and ethical foundations of those involved at the highest level. It is because of this that authoritarian investment in sport leads to higher degrees of coverage and critique by non-states actors than, for example, these states' engagement with other industries, such as their multiple overseas investments in non-sporting infrastructure projects, retail chains, or financial services. Second, as an increasing number of authoritarian states come to invest in global sports clubs, leagues, and events, international non-governmental organisations and the media find themselves with a greater number of areas to publicly critique. Consequently, while investment in sport looks, in part at least, to bolster the image of both the investor and investee (as demonstrated above), so too has it emerged as a highly attractive and crucial site through which non-state actors can develop a set of controversial and scandalous

mediated themes over a sustained period of time. The result of these twin processes is that notions of sportswashing, and the purported claim that a state's investment in sport will distract attention away from its problem at home, will always fall short in terms of their explanatory power to understand the real reasons why states invest in elite sport.

The crucial necessity of public interest to global domestic politics means that sportsdirtying is a process heavily linked to time. Elsewhere, Authors et al. (2023) have argued that this time-dependent process takes place through three types or 'waves' of public critique, each of which has a different underlying rationale, focus, and impact. In advancing this argument further, we suggest that the first of these waves denotes what we label as a 'response wave' – that is, a wave formed by significant critical response from non-state actors to the formation of a new arrangement between an authoritarian investor and a sporting investee, such as the awarding of a sports mega-event, or investment into a sporting club or league. The novelty, surprise, and/or excitement of this new arrangement leads to substantial public interest, which is then used by non-state actors to show their significant critique and disapproval of this relationship by highlighting the socio-political fallacies of the authoritarian investor state. It is here where the reputational damage to the investor's image is at its greatest. Over time, the level of public interest decreases, and thus so does the potential for global domestic politics to be as effective. We then enter into what we refer to as the 'peripheral wave'. In this second wave, the novelty of the new investor-investee arrangement decreases, and subsequently so too does the level of public interest. Having highlighted the fallacies of the authoritarian investor in the first wave, these non-state actors then seek to draw on the remaining interest to raise concerns about the moral and ethical foundations of elite sport. Key here are questions over how those in charge of sports leagues, events, and/or clubs were complicit in the formation of the arrangement. Finally, the third wave we denote as the 'context wave'. It is here where the level of public interest is at its lowest, and mention of the initial arrangement is used only as contextual reference in response to new, yet related, phenomena, such as when the initial authoritarian investor state invests in an additional sporting venture.

In returning to our case studies, we draw here on the example of the Saudi Public Investment Fund's purchase of Newcastle United FC to demonstrate our sportsdirtying waves. As detailed above, the first wave centres on significant critical response by multiple international non-governmental organisations and the media. Immediately following the announcement, Human Rights Watch (2021), for example, responded by labelling the takeover as a case of 'sportswashing', and publicly urged fans to 'look past' the potential riches the Public Investment Fund may bring to the football club, and instead to focus on 'the darker side of Saudi Arabia' with its associated and widespread human rights abuses. Similarly, media networks such as The Guardian (2021b) responded by warning that the takeover represented a priceless vehicle 'for international image-laundering' by Saudi Arabia and argued that 'the focus needs to be maintained on how appalling Saudi Arabia's and Bin Salman's human rights records are'. Over time, as public interest started to fade, coverage then moved on to the second wave, whereby the focus shifted onto the broader morals, values, and responsibilities of sport itself. Note, for example, how in the aftermath of the Newcastle takeover, The Guardian (2022a) shifted its focus towards reporting on broader sporting issues, with headlines such as 'Could 2022 be sportswashing's biggest year?'. Likewise, Human Rights Watch (2024b) response to the takeover moved towards questions over the broader regulation of football, and the need for an independent football regulator to block 'states looking to 'sportswash' their rights abuses through English football'. In both cases, the Newcastle takeover is used as one of the

key rationales for instigating these broader debates. The final wave is then led by the formation of related phenomenon. One example here would be FIFA's awarding of the rights to the 2034 World Cup to Saudi Arabia. This initially created significant public interest, thus placing the awarding process firmly in the first of our waves. While in this first wave, reference was however regularly made to the takeover of Newcastle United, as the media and international governmental organisations sought to contextualise their critical responses (see Human Rights Watch, 2024c; The Guardian, 2024a).

Conclusion

The article set out to make an original and significant contribution to international relations in three notable ways. First, to demonstrate the need for international scholars to exercise caution in their use of the popular term 'sportswashing'. Second, to clearly show that, in contrast to sportswashing assumptions, this process is not the simple outcome of image politics alone but rather the result of a much broader set of mutual motivations and interests that exist between multiple stakeholders. Finally, to advance what we term 'sportsdirtying', to show that, rather than distracting audiences' attention away from one's socio-political issues that, in fact, authoritarian state investment in sport actually leads to a heightening of public awareness and critique.

In seeking to achieve these aims, the article has argued that the term sportswashing includes four inherent weaknesses and inaccuracies. To advance beyond sportswashing's fallacies, we have implemented an assemblage theory approach to show how authoritarian investment in global elite sport is the result of a wide range of mutual interests that exist between various stakeholders. Specifically, through our two cases studies, we have demonstrated how each assemblage is held together by three 'basins of attraction': an *economic* basin, a *political* basin, and an *identity* basin. Crucially, we have shown that these respective basins have formed by, on the ohand, the desires of the authoritarian investor state to diversify their national economies, to shore up influence and wealth overseas, and the long-term search for image enhancement and soft power; while, on the other hand, these basins have also been formed by the mutual benefit of the assemblage which is sought by global sport's governing bodies, sport teams and athletes, overseas sporting leagues, and specific regions and cities abroad, all of whom seek to actively take advantage of the new found level of wealth (and the associated financial security) that the authoritarian investor state provides. Finally, we have also shown that authoritarian investment into sport will always be accompanied by global domestic politics, and thus a more appropriate term than 'sportswashing', we contend, would be 'sportsdirtying', a process we have explained and advanced in the previous section.

We believe our analysis of authoritarian state investment into sport will be of interest to two key groups. The first are the range of scholars interested in the foreign policy of authoritarian states, the global political economy of cities, the politics of sport and other cultural events, or those engaged in an assemblage analysis of international relations. Specifically, moving forward, we hope our analysis here will encourage scholars to question the use of sportswashing as an academic term, and to adopt a perspective that offers a much wider lens through which to academically and critically examine authoritarian state investment in sport. We have demonstrated here how assemblage theory might be one such approach. Second would be the range of non-academic audiences, such as journalists, policy analysts, and various international non-governmental organisations, all of

whom have drawn on the term sportswashing in their explanation of the investment into sport by non-democratic states.

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