

This case study presents several examples of sportswashing that have been reported around the world over the last twenty years, primarily in soccer. The study is meant to develop students' analytical skills, awareness of modern public relations trends and tactics, as well as their understanding of ethical issues they may face.

Sportswashing: The practice of an individual, group, corporation, or nation-state using sport to deflect attention and launder their public image through hosting a sporting event, sponsorship, or the purchase of a team.¹

BACKGROUND

Throughout history governments and businesses have practiced sportswashing as a means of manipulating public opinion. However, the term wasn't widely used until Azerbaijan hosted the European Games in 2015.² Regardless of when the term first came into use, the Olympics have long been an excellent example of sportswashing. In fact, several worldwide events have allegedly been subject to sportswashing including Germany hosting the 1936 Olympic Games just prior to their invading Poland, Russia hosting the 2014 Winter Olympics during their annexation of Crimea, and China hosting the 2022 Winter Olympics amid the uproar of the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghur Muslims.^{[3][4][5]}

Perhaps the most common examples of sportswashing today can be found in world football (or soccer as it's referred to in the United States). Football is by far the most popular sport in the world, and as a result, it has a powerful influence over many of the fans. Each country has a premier league that consists of 20 of the nation's best clubs that compete to win the league title. The top four teams in a few of the European leagues also compete to obtain the highest accolade within club football, the UEFA Champions League. Like teams in the NFL or NBA, professional soccer teams are assets that can be bought and sold. However, because of the immense influence the sport maintains, as well as the huge amounts of money circulating within it, European soccer has become a hotbed for sportswashing in recent years. Here are just a few examples to consider:

CHELSEA FC

In June 2003, Roman Abramovich, a Russian oligarch and former governor of the Chukotka province (2000–08), purchased the London-based Chelsea Football Club. After the purchase, Abramovich used his wealth to inject new quality into both the first team and the academy. In fact, partially as a result of his liberal investment, Chelsea has won every major trophy available to the club at least once (some multiple times) including the English Premier League's highly prestigious UEFA Champions League.

There is no question Abramovich and his vast expenditures helped Chelsea be successful. However, due to purported ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin amid Russia's recent war with Ukraine, and mounting pressure from the United Kingdom's government to freeze Abramovich's assets, he was forced to put the club up for sale.⁶

While we may never know Abramovich's true reasons for buying Chelsea — after all he rarely interacts with the media yet he attends many of his club's games — it's not a stretch to see his actions with the club as efforts to separate himself from politics or to help redefine Russia's public image. And regardless of whether he was consciously participating in sportswashing, or if he simply wanted to be part of the European soccer world, his actions have helped usher in a wave of club owners who are using the sport as a way to distract public attention and improve their image.

GAZPROM

Gazprom is a Russian majority state-owned multinational energy corporation that produces natural gas. In December 2005, the company purchased the controlling stake of FC Zenit Saint Petersburg. The club made star signings with inflated wages and transfer fees in an effort to become a rising force in European tournaments. Two years later, Gazprom began making a concerted effort to expand its brand messaging in the footballing world by sponsoring the iconic German soccer team FC Schalke 04.⁷

By 2012, the club-funding approach had prepared the Russian company to pivot and focus more efforts on becoming a major sponsor for the biggest football tournaments in the world. Thus, the marketing conquest continued when Gazprom became a key sponsor of the UEFA Champions League and UEFA Super Cup.

The next stage of the strategy led to the official partnership for Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) international tournaments. Gazprom served as the official partner for FIFA tournaments from 2015–2020, including the Russian-hosted 2018 World Cup and the Euro 2020 tournament. Russia's hosting of the World Cup masked a 6-year preparation and \$11 billion investment riddled with human rights violations.⁸ Despite the huge financial and human cost, the tournament left visitors and watchers with an improved perception of the country.⁹

Then, in February 2022, Russia formally invaded Ukraine, triggering worldwide outrage. Gazprom lost many of its partnerships as the world began imposing business and financial sanctions on Russia. Perhaps sportswashing had an effect in blinding the public's eye until things had already escalated too far.

MANCHESTER CITY FC

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) history contains many cases of human rights violations.^{[10][11]} In August 2008, the president of the Abu Dhabi United Group and member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, Sheikh Mansour, led the purchase of Manchester City FC. This takeover made the club one of the wealthiest soccer teams in the world. Mansour's actions have widely been criticized as blatant efforts to present the UAE as a progressive state while distracting attention away from the condemnable acts of the government.¹² Sound familiar?

Following this purchase, Manchester City FC followed the model of Chelsea FC but on a new level. Investing massive amounts of money in player signings and salaries, developing a state-of-the-art academy for youth teams, founding community-building charities, and stadium reconversion and expansion that nearly doubled attendance capacity, the team eventually began dominating competitions and becoming a powerhouse in soccer.

Mansour's Manchester City project is an example of an appealing, organized, and effective branding technique. It displays the power that both marketing and public relations can have in reshaping a brand, or even a country's, public image.

■ QATAR

Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), a subsidiary of Qatar's sovereign wealth fund Qatar Investment Authority, became Paris Saint-Germain FC's (PSG) majority shareholders in June 2011 and sole shareholders in March 2012. This means PSG is a state-owned club, and thus one of the richest teams in the world. QSI chairman Nasser Al-Khelaifi has been president of the team since the takeover.

Can you guess what followed? The same model that Chelsea FC and Manchester City FC implemented. Except, PSG took their branding in a slightly different direction. The club aimed its marketing efforts toward the younger generations to become part of pop culture. Signing upcoming stars (for ludicrous amounts of money) and partnering with Micheal Jordan's brand helped the club to become fashionable and cool.¹³

Then, Qatar Airways, a company with significant financial ties to the Qatari Government, became the primary shirt sponsor for FC Barcelona (2013–17), A.S. Roma (2018), and Boca Juniors (2018). In May 2017, Qatar Airways partnered with FIFA and became one of the primary sponsors for the 2018 and 2022 World Cup tournaments.

Having secured the bid in 2010 to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup, Qatar has sought to improve its image in the world through the beloved sport. After all, this is the first World Cup ever to be held in the Arab world. However, it's reported that more than 6,500 deaths have occurred in Qatar's World Cup preparations.¹⁴

With billions invested into clubs, sponsorships, and World Cup preparations, one question lingers in the thoughts of many: Why wouldn't Qatar invest all that money into its infrastructure, or its social, judicial, and economic systems as a way of improving its public image instead of investing it in soccer?

■ NEWCASTLE UNITED FC – OCTOBER 2021

Saudi Arabia's influence in world soccer grew significantly around 2015 as it began investing more in the development of its domestic league. That same year, Xavi, an FC Barcelona and Spanish National Team legend, signed with the Saudi club Al Sadd. He eventually took up the role of First Team Manager at the club from 2019–2021. The country also began hosting other nations' domestic league cups such as the Supercoppa Italiana (2018–2019) and the Supercopa de España (2019–2020, 2021–2022). Similarly, when Diego Maradona, one of soccer's most beloved icons, tragically died in 2020, Saudi Arabia hosted the "Maradona Cup," a match to honor his legacy between two of the clubs that were special in Maradona's career.

In October 2021, PCP Capital Partners, RB Sports & Media, and the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia (PIF) purchased an 80% stake in Newcastle United FC for £300 million. The purchase made Newcastle one of the richest clubs in the world, and was met with much controversy and divisive opinions from both fans of the club and spectators of the deal. But, what caused the controversy?

Many claim that the purchase was an attempt to distract from anti-LGBTQ laws and other human rights violations taking place in Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ In fact, these same violations, as well as indications that the Saudi government provided financial support to a piracy company that infringes on the rights of British broadcasting company Sky Sports, forced the Saudi purchasing consortium to withdraw its offer the previous year.

As if that weren't enough, a 2018 intelligence report from the CIA claimed that Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered the capture and assassination of the Saudi journalist and dissident Jamal Khashoggi. The report states that, "since 2017, the Crown Prince has had absolute control of the Kingdom's security and intelligence organizations." And while it may be unclear as to how much say the Prince has in the PIF's activities, this report indicates that he was likely aware of the Newcastle club purchase.¹⁶

After the purchase of Newcastle United, Saudi Arabia had spent a total of \$2 billion dollars throughout all its sportswashing endeavors.¹⁷

■ ANALYSIS & QUESTIONS

After reading the case study, students will write a three-page analysis and response. Then, as a class or in groups, discuss conclusions, perspectives, and key aspects of the case.

- How is sportswashing an effective PR strategy? What are the risks and potential gains involved? What other tactics are similar to it? (½ page)
- What section of the PRSA Code of Ethics addresses the ethics of sportswashing? Using this information, defend the position that sportswashing is not ethical. (½ page)
- Research the political, socioeconomic, and cultural influences that may lead countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE to make decisions to purchase or sponsor sports teams and events. Write a summary of what other strategies might be more effective in shaping public opinion. Support your argument with evidence from at least three external sources not cited in this study. (1 page)
- As a PR professional working for your favorite sports team, craft a communication strategy for the allegations of sportswashing in your organization. (1 page)

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