

Playing for Power: Evaluating Sportswashing with a Case Studies Approach

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RESEARCH FOCUS

This study sets out to investigate the debate about the real and perceived effects of “sportswashing”—the practice in which a state uses sports to deflect attention away from human rights violations in order to launder their reputation.

Research Question: Does government investment in sportswashing result in economic and political gains or losses?

MOTIVATION FOR THIS WORK

In recent years, the term “sportswashing” has emerged prominently in global politics.

2022 Qatar FIFA World Cup

- Negative international attention
- Criticism from humanitarian organizations

LIV Golf

- Widespread media coverage
- Allegations

Why do states invest in sportswashing and is it effective?

- To alter their reputations?
- To shape global behaviors towards their country?
- To actualize their political vision?

The political use of sport by states has been neglected in terms of international relations research.

Strong link between soft power and sports?

UNDERSTANDING SOFT POWER

Power: “the ability to affect the outcomes you want, and, if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen.”

Hard Power vs Soft Power

Hard Power

- Coercion and Payments
- Threat of punishment or the possibility of reward
- E.g., economic incentives or military capabilities

Soft Power (Joseph Nye)

- Enticement and attraction
- Indirect, non-coercive method for influence
- ‘Co-optive’
- Culture, political values, foreign policies
- Works through the interests and preferences of actors
- Acquiescence, imitation, and emulation
- Storytelling and narratives
- Credibility and perceptions

UNDERSTANDING SPORTS DIPLOMACY

Public diplomacy: deliberate communication effort to mobilize and draw attention to soft power resources

- Dependent on acceptance and credibility

Sports Diplomacy: states take advantage of athletes, teams, and competitions for diplomatic and foreign policy purposes

High-profile opportunity to

- Appeal to and engage public
- Promote international understanding, shared values

Historical use of sports diplomacy

- ‘Ping pong diplomacy’ (1970s)
- USA boycotted the Moscow Olympics (1980)

Sports Mega-Events (SMEs) [Olympics, FIFA World Cup]

- Significant soft power opportunities
- Legitimization
- Project a positive image, alter the perception of a foreign public
- Drawbacks? Costs? Negative legacies?

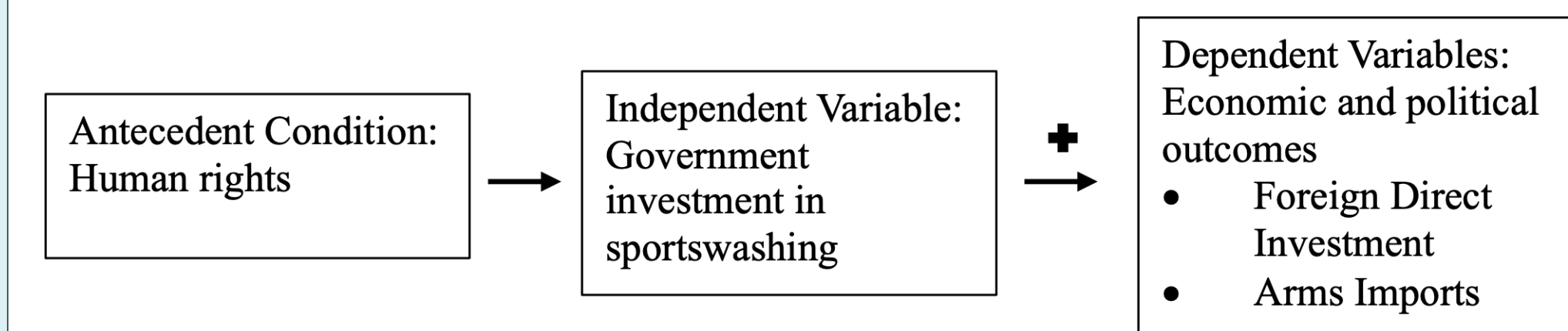
“Soft Disempowerment” (Brannagan and Giulianotti)

- Fungible asset, relative gains or losses can be measured
- “Unintended outcome of losing attraction and credibility”
- Upsets, offends, or alienates others
- Erosion of a country’s political legitimacy and credibility
- Unfavorable media narratives...

Sportswashing

- Designed to build positive associations rather than simply conceal
- A means to conduct diplomacy, improve and forge relations globally and attract tourists, investments, and trade
- Distraction, minimization, and normalization

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY



Independent Variable: “lower” and “upper” levels

Dependent Variables:

- Average change in foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows in billions of USD
- Average change in arms imports (TIV in millions) [SIPRI Arms Transfers Database]
- Major, moderate, and minor categories

Hypothesis: If a government invests in sportswashing, then this will lead this state to gain economically and politically.

Longitudinal case studies: method of difference

QATAR

Human Rights Violations

- Deaths and exploitation of migrant workers
- Women’s and LGBTQ rights

Government Investment in Sportswashing

- *Qatar National Vision 2030*
- Qatar Investment Authority: \$475 billion USD
- 2022 FIFA World Cup: \$220 billion USD
- Hosting of SMEs (Formula 1, ATP Tennis...)
- Ownership and sponsorship of prominent foreign clubs, teams, leagues, and players.
- State-owned enterprises: Qatar Airways, Al Jazeera...

Economic and Political Outcomes

Year	FDI inflows (in billions of USD)	Year	Arms Imports (TIV in Millions)
2009	8.12	2009	286
2012	0.39	2012	335
2013	-0.84	2013	82
2014	1.04	2014	55
2015	1.07	2015	520
2016	0.77	2016	885
2017	0.98	2017	619
2018	-2.19	2018	581
2019	-2.81	2019	2048
2020	-2.43	2020	838
2021	-1.09	2021	2075
2022	0.07	2022	3342

2012-2022 average:	-0.45
Total change:	-8.57

Source: World Bank DataBank 2022

2012-2022 average:	1034.5
Total change:	748

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

SAUDI ARABIA

Human Rights Violations

- Political and civil freedoms: women’s and LGBTQ rights
- Murder of Jamal Khashoggi
- Crimes against humanity: killing asylum seekers
- Yemen airstrikes and conflict

Government Investment in Sportswashing

- *Saudi Vision 2030*
- Public Investment Fund: \$775 billion USD
- Newcastle United: \$400 million USD in 2021
- Saudi Pro League: Cristiano Ronaldo...
- LIV Golf Tour: \$2 billion USD
- Hosting of SMEs (Boxing, WWE, Formula 1, ATP Tennis...)

Economic and Political Outcomes

Year	FDI inflows (in billions of USD)	Year	Arms Imports (TIV in millions)
2015	8.14	2015	3389
2018	4.25	2018	3276
2019	4.56	2019	3484
2020	5.4	2020	2491
2021	19.29	2021	1739
2022	7.89	2022	2272

2018-2022 average:	8.278
Total change:	+0.138

Source: World Bank DataBank 2022

2018-2022 average:	2652.4
Total change:	-736.6

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

Mixed Results

- Did not appear to support my hypothesis
- No clear pattern between cases or year to year
- Level of sportswashing is also not significant in this equation

Influence of Other Factors

- Qatar diplomatic crisis (2017-2021)
- Domestic policy changes and priorities
- Oil price volatility

Revisiting Theory

Soft Power

- Impacts of soft power is elusive in the real-world
- Soft power is indirect in nature
- Long term vs short term
- Soft power requires appropriate integration with hard power
- Soft disempowerment: unclear effects

Sportswashing

- Clarified motivations
- Achieving national development plans (economic diversification)
- Leaders continue to invest because they think there is value
- Domestic aims may be just as important as international aims
- Countries continue to receive bids to host SMEs in the future
- Some audiences celebrate this investment

IMPLICATIONS

- Effectively described the nature and scope of sportswashing today
- Reinforces the complexities behind the effects of government investment in sportswashing and soft power
- Sports diplomacy is in vogue
- The prevalence of sportswashing will increase if there are concrete benefits down the line
- Both countries are becoming known as destinations for sports competitions, and there is no sign that they will run out of capital to fund these initiatives

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