

Module 4. Image Laundering and Sportswashing

Unit 4.1

Introduction

In this module, we will focus on the murky area of image laundering and sportswashing. As sport has expanded, these elements of sport have become more widespread and used in various sporting circles.

To fully understand the topic, we will begin outlining image laundering as a concept and its role within a sporting context, and then we will specifically define the concept of sportswashing. In the sportswashing section, the discussion will then move to how this practice can benefit certain actors within the field, and then we will focus on its wider impact on sport. A debate on the ethical considerations that must be made by actors within sport will then be provided. To bring the work together, we will then provide a series of case studies to show exactly how image laundering and sportswashing work in a modern sporting context. We will begin with image laundering.

Image laundering

Image laundering is about changing an image from something that is publicly unacceptable to something more credible and acceptable. It allows those seeking to rid themselves of an undesirable image the opportunity to bolster their reputation (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Even if there is no one specific area in which this takes place, it is often seen in politics, business, or international relations, as actors within these areas seek an edge in extremely competitive sectors. The reason that they do this is that the general population, consumers, or other countries are an important factor in making sure that goals can be achieved, whether that is becoming elected, selling more products or, in terms of a nation state, pushing through an international policy that might help it on the global market. A country might also do it to boost tourism or investment in a region (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Despite the good that these actions can do, there is also a darker side which needs to be considered.

The darker reasons that a business or a country would wish to launder their image through event hosting or foreign investment are complex: they might want to create a diversion from abuses that have been carried out in their country or elsewhere. In addition, they might want to distance themselves from actions they did in the past while continuing to carry them out; these actions are against international law. These are, of course, grave issues, but this is the spectrum of image laundering: it can go from the minor

(helping someone to get elected to a low governmental position) to the major (washing the image of a country or a nation state).

There are multiple ways in which a change of image can be achieved for an individual, group, or business. For example, the process of reshaping the image of an individual can begin by engaging them in socially acceptable or charitable behaviours. By taking part in these behaviours, the image of the person is changed from one that is unacceptable to one that cares about the locality in which they live. This is not a short process, however, and it requires investment of time and a strong strategy. If these aspects are not in place, the public or other views of these acts will see them as superficial and not as an accurate representation of that person; therefore, any supposed image gains will be reduced if they happen at all.

There are methods that can be employed to stop ourselves falling or being part of an image launder process. Human Rights Watch (2020) suggests that relationships or interactions should be avoided with organisations or countries that are seeking to launder their image if they have a history of covering up human rights abuses. In addition, not reacting or engaging with deliberate attempts to wash abuses or other undesirable actions away through different initiatives, such as hosting events, should be adhered to. Of course, this can be difficult to spot, and therefore a close eye needs to be kept on those that we associate with, as this can impact on our reputation as well. Image laundering occurs in sport, and it is not a new concept, despite its rebranding in parts as sportswashing.

Sportswashing

Sportswashing is a relatively new concept that has become a staple of the academic literature in the last decade or so. This is not to imply that it has not been an almost ever present in sport in the past, but it has perhaps not been recognised as such. So, to further explain the development of the concept, we find ourselves here discussing it and its link to image laundering. Now we will move to the next subsection.

Reasons why sport is used in this way

Sport is popular all over the world, regardless of the playing field; it is the pastime and a regular occurrence in countless people's lives. Fans of various sports have strong connections to their sport and club teams, and they are unlikely to stop participating and watching even if their sport does become part of sportswashing. In some cases, their sport or team might benefit from the sportswashing actions, so why would fans oppose that? Therefore, it is not really a surprise that sport has become a very popular way for soft power to be achieved and, as a result, a channel for sportswashing behaviours.

In addition, the amount of finance and work related to sport has also increased in all areas of the globe. Sportswashing has the potential to raise significant funds of events; even nations might benefit from the investment in a sport or event. It might also produce



further opportunities with which to work within sport and to better a person's career. Again, it is unlikely that countless people would complain about it in this circumstance, although some do, as we will come to later in the reading. But first, sportswashing was not the first type of washing to be considered in the media or academia.

Development of the concept

Sportswashing came from similar areas known as bluewashing, greenwashing, and, the newer concept, pinkwashing. Bluewashing is a form of image laundering that was coined in 2002 as a result of some companies' actions while working in tandem with the United Nations; hence the blue colouring, taken from the organisations' helmets and logo (Sailer *et al.*, 2022). While professing to do good, they were, in fact, acting in ways that, had they been uncovered at the time, would have been met with a negative public reaction.

This is similar to the concept of greenwashing, which this time focuses on environmental issues. A company will focus on things they have done for the benefit of the environment to improve their image with potential consumers (Sailer *et al.*, 2022). However, these are often exaggerated claims that bear very little resemblance to the actions of the organisation daily. A new addition to this area has been pinkwashing, that is when organisations, including governmental organisations, will promote LGBT+ causes appealing to certain costumers or populations, but, again, they will not match the practices or laws that are enacted daily. And this has now moved to sport.

Sportswashing

Sportswashing, as stated earlier in the reading, is the act of using sport as a vehicle for laundering an image. International sport has been impacted on by sportswashing consistently and, as in some cases, it has been used to hide abuses and other crimes. For example, within a country specific context, sportswashing occurs when "authoritarian regimes attempt to improve or cover over their tarnished global reputation through sports" (Lenskyj, 2020). Søyland (2020) further contends that purpose in this regard of sportswashing is "to launder the reputation of a country by being associated with the global appeal of sports" (p. 4).

However, Skey (2022) offers a different view, arguing that "sportswashing focuses on acts of consociation rather than deception. It is designed to build positive associations with a state/country rather than simply conceal" (p. 760). All three of these definitions provide a good insight into the topic. The motivations of each actor might be different, as are the methods of investment, but, essentially, the positive connections in the consumers' minds to the country of origin are the aim of the sportswashing attempt.

Sportswashing can be observed in all forms of sport and all over the world, and, as sport is only increasing, with financial rewards following, it is likely to also increase. Although the definitions are relatively recent, sportswashing has been going on in one form or another for several more years.



History of sportswashing

One of the early examples of sportswashing that has been used as the start of the practice is that of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. The figure below shows the poster from these Olympic Games.

Figure 1. Olympic poster



Source: [untitled image of Olympic poster], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/45Ntp62>.

The games were held as the Nazi Party began their rise to power. The games were an attempt to show the world that they were a party to be taken seriously and that their goals and ideology should be welcomed by the world. Hence, they held a lavish event at newly built venues. The aim of the games, as we discussed in the previous reading, was somewhat undermined by the performance of black American athlete, Jesse Owens. However, they are still held up as an example of an early form of the concept. So, while there was an attempt, it might not have been successful as it aimed to be.

The Berlin Olympics were not the only attempt at sportswashing that is now seen in black and white pictures. South Africa before the mid nineteen nineties was a very different place than it is now. It was ruled under a form of racial segregation known as Apartheid. This political position led to the exclusion of South Africa from almost all sporting fixtures and events held on the world stage. However, matches and tours to the region continued as the South African government sought to legitimise their politics on the world stage. These actions did not break the boycott. In fact, the boycott was well policed with overall strong adherence, the United Nations monitoring the situation and compiling a list of

countries, teams and individuals who broke the boycott. Even with this pressure, sport was still used as a method to break Apartheid barriers, namely rugby and cricket.

Rugby was arguably the sport that continued playing against South Africa during this period. South Africa remained a member of the International Rugby Board during this period and games were regularly held against other international and invitational sides, including England, France, Ireland, and the British and Irish Lions. Despite the continued games, fans and even players were not supportive; to see an example, observe the figure below.

Figure 2. Anti-Apartheid protesters outside Twickenham for the visit of South Africa in 1970



Source: [untitled image of Anti-Apartheid protesters outside Twickenham], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/45NuzhU>.

The picture above shows the protests before South Africa visited for a rugby match against England; approval was certainly not unanimous. South Africa were eventually banned from the first two editions of the Rugby World Cup, with the international exile only stopping after the end of Apartheid. In recent years, players have also spoken out about their disappointment with the role that rugby and even they themselves played in 'legitimising' the regime through continued competition with South Africa (Hayward, 2019).

Rugby was not the only sport to break the boycott, with sections of cricket also doing the same. The initial boycott of cricket against South Africa was raised in 1968, when they refused a mixed-race England team to tour the country, leading to their near total isolation from all forms of international cricket. This did not stop all games being played,

with several rebel tours being organised with players being co-opted into Rest of the World XI teams to play the South Africans, often in return for large sums of cash as appearance fees.

The practice was controversial and was eventually banned outright by the International Cricket Council, who stated that anyone who played against a South African team was to be banned from cricket for a minimum of 4 years. In much the same way as rugby, cricket was used as a way of showing South Africa in a different light than it might have normally been. In addition, the sometimes successful attempts to attract notable players of the day in return for appearance fees are another early example of sportswashing.

What these examples show is that the external pressures can limit the success of sportswashing. If the international community is steadfast in their resolve that a country should not be able to participate, then any potential sportswashing gains are limited. However, there also exists the willingness to play countries whatever their views or history, often for the promise of an inflated bank balance. This is something that has not changed as we move into a modern context, which we will discover next.

Modern sportswashing

As the sports market has increased in size, competitiveness, and importance, there are now countless more opportunities and instances of behaviours that could be defined as sportswashing. There are numerous examples of sportswashing in the modern world of sport. Some of them we will cover in our case study section, but, given the amount, we can also include some here.

We touched on the Berlin Olympics as being one of the first recognised sporting mega events that aligned with a sportswashing definition. Successive Olympics have also been noted for their sportswashing when hosting the games. For example, the Sochi Winter Olympics are a good example of sportswashing in the modern era: they were driven by Russia, along with the 2018 FIFA World Cup, not only as a way of modernising in the view of the world, but also as a means of allowing the country to achieve political goals. As suggested by Rosenberg (2022):

The games made Russia seem like it (and its leader's views) belonged on the world stage. Russia kept using sports to look strong (instituting a state-sponsored doping program to increase the country's medal count) and friendly (Putin opened the '18 men's World Cup by welcoming spectators and journalists to 'open, hospitable, friendly Russia'." (para. 18).



Figure 3. The Olympic rings and cauldron for the Olympic flame, Sochi Olympic Park



Source: Bensch, 2014, <https://bit.ly/45IVQ4S>.

In the immediate aftermath of the games, the sportswashing had, in fact, worked. The world did appear less concerned about anti-LGBT+ laws in the country, and largely overlooked the invasion of parts of Ukraine in 2014. This can be evidenced through the fact that neither the games nor the World Cup four years later was met with any real condemnation from the international stage. Only after a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, in tandem with numerous drug infractions, has the international sporting community acted and banned players, teams, and federations from competition. However, we could notice that aims have already been achieved, allowing the situation as it currently presents itself. However, it is not all good news for the sportswashers. Sportswashing has undoubtedly come more into the public arena in recent years, helped by further reporting of the issues in various media outlets and in academic literature. The increased attention on the act of sportswashing has arguably made it harder for those engaging in the practice to 'get away' with it. It is important to remember that sportswashing is not an illegal act and, therefore, there will be no prosecutions for engaging in an act that is considered to be sportswashing. However, what it has led to is the public becoming more aware of the acts and maybe the ulterior motives for some to engage in the practice.

This removes the main aim of sportswashing, which is to launder an image through sport; so, how it is possible to do that if everyone is aware of what is being done? It can therefore look like a cynical attempt with which to divert attention away from the less desirable aspects of a company's or our country's actions. This is not to say there are no beneficiaries to sportswashing.

Beneficiaries

The main beneficiaries are, of course, those organisations or countries that engage in sportswashing themselves and the sport or club that they invest in. The sporting organisation that receives the investment could pay off debts, build new facilities, or improve their playing squad. This could not only secure the future of the organisation, but also take them to levels that they could not have imagined previously. With this, further revenue streams could also open and, again, in the future, make the club self-sufficient and reduce the reliance on the sportswashing payment.

The sportswashing organisation as well can benefit, if their investment is done correctly, and it achieves the goals that are set, which might include those above. Attention has in the past moved away from where the money initially came from. The takeovers at multiple football clubs have shown this in recent years. Progress on the field has always eventually trumped the source of funding.

In addition, those investing can diversify their investment portfolio, in effect, future proofing themselves should a product or area of national wealth suddenly decline. It does not only allow them acceptance on the international stage, but also to be seen with more reputable people or in the company of big business. It appeals to the public it shows of their country or region, each making the decision makers in that country just that little bit more secure. It can also increase further investment in the country, which, while related to the sporting event being hosted or team being sponsored, is its own separate financial agreement, further improving the lives of citizens and making them more secure in positions of power.

There are, of course, other beneficiaries to a policy that encourages sport and the investment that comes along with it. Consider the recent FIFA World Cup in Qatar; it is widely considered to be one of the biggest sportswashing projects of all time (Ganji, 2022). The amount that they have invested in not just the World Cup, but also in associated infrastructure and attracting other sporting competitions to the country has been massive. Huge developments including transport links, stadiums, housing, and commercial infrastructure have sprung up all over the country because of Qatar diverting funds towards sport in recent years. While the impact of this can be seen from the wider world when the events are on, this also impacts on those who live and work in the country.

The improvement in facilities, including sports specific facilities, and infrastructure will have undoubtedly had a positive impact on those that live in the state. Daily lives or sporting opportunities are one area that will have changed since the tournament award was made. One of the main concerns about Qatar was the use of migrant workers that built the vast infrastructure projects. They have been historically paid extremely low wages and even more distressingly have been in effect trapped with one employer and unable to move jobs without the say so of that current employer. The heightened interest in these employment practices has meant that some reform is now happening in this area. Given the developments and the influx of tourists to the country for these events, you



would be hard-pressed to argue that these events have not been to the benefit of some of those living in Qatar.

This is not to say that Qatar has managed to complete its desired image change. There were voices noting Qatar's approach from the moment it was awarded the World Cup to the moment it finished, highlighting the injustices in the country. Furthermore, not everything in the country has changed: LGBT+ and women's rights are still criticised by many charitable organisations and countries the world over.

This is just one example and there are plenty more to focus on, but it does show that there are benefits of sportswashing, whether we would like to admit it or not. But, as we know, while there are beneficiaries, there can also be those that do not benefit from this arrangement, allowing further negative developments to foster.

The issues with sportswashing

As we can imagine, there are several issues with sportswashing and image laundering. These issues can impact on all forms of sport and society. We will break this section down into the following subsections: sports organisations, fans, governments, and the sportswashers themselves, as not even they are immune from the issues. Firstly, we will look at the impact on the sporting organisations themselves.

For sporting organisations

When we are discussing sporting organisations, we could mean, in this instance, a club, team, or a manufacture of sports equipment. Some of these organisations might not actually be involved in the sportswashing itself, while others will be at the centre of it. How involved they are could determine what sort of response they are given by fans and other consumers as a result of the sportswashing.

Let us first look at clubs and teams. It is perhaps easier if we imagine this from the perspective of football. So, a club is taken over by a nation state and, while not commented on expressly, it is a way of achieving sportswashing objectives.

The issues that could occur here are like the ones that have been observed in Qatar; even though a vast amount of money is spent, in this case, on the stadium or playing squad, success or the public being okay with the takeover are not guaranteed. The takeovers from nation states that have occurred have not been met with universal approval. It is perhaps expected that fans of opposing teams might not be that delighted with a rival club getting a sudden influx of cash, which allows it to be more competitive in the league. However, other voices often come from those with no interest in the game of football itself. They are heard denouncing the takeover as an act of sportswashing and highlighting the risks of allowing the takeover to happen given, for example, the poor human rights record.

The club, therefore, will have to bat away this criticism and hope that results on the field can quickly deflect from the takeover itself, before sponsors or other investors, such as equipment providers, get nervous about the negative attention. It is not just the club that will suffer, but also those associated with it if the attention does not die down.

For fans

The fans of a club, tournament, or game can also be impacted on by these issues. They might receive backlash from their colleagues and peers for continuing to watch an event with the sportswashing tag applied to it. When Newcastle United were taken over by the PIF, linked to Saudi Arabia, most fans were very happy with it. The move had replaced an unpopular owner with a new one who promised to increase the funds available for player transfers. However, a group of Newcastle fans did not welcome the move with open arms. While recognising the potential for on the field success, concerns from at least one fan group, NUFC Against Sportswashing, were raised about the spate of executions happening in the country, allegedly including children (Cunningham, 2022). The group conducted a protest at a game and were not received positively by everyone, including amongst their own fans who viewed their approach as divisive.

Figure 4. Newcastle fan group against sportswashing



Source: [untitled image of Newcastle fan group against sportswashing], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3Ecwvvn>.

On another more practical level, they might also find themselves priced out of attending fixtures, as their club raises through the leagues because of increased investment and popularity, or unable to attend tournaments, due to them being moved away from their traditional heartlands and again costs increasing. The Handball World Championship was hosted by Qatar in 2015, moving away from its usual areas of Europe. As a result, attendances were poor with the competition being notable for the Qatar team, made up

of seasoned professionals naturalised from other countries, making it to the runners-up spot in the competition.

For governments

Even though they might be far removed from the goings-on of sport, or at least they should be, governments can also be implicated in sportswashing attempts. In a similar fashion to those organisations that become linked with clubs and teams that are engaged with sportswashing, the governments themselves can become impacted on by the actions of the sportswasher, especially if the actions are against the norms of that society. This might lead to a lack of trust towards a government from the population, as they are viewed not to have controlled the sportswashing attempts.

The government of the nation where sportswashing is taking place could also be impacted on in terms of international relations. It might not only be the population of that country which feels let down, as international friends and neighbours begin to question how this method is allowed to continue by a country's government.

For the sportswashers

We have briefly touched on how sportswashing can negatively impact on the entity directing the sportswashing itself, namely, that the public and others see through the attempts to sportswash and call it out for what it is. It could lead them into conflict with fans and other clubs, as has been the case with Newcastle United, with other Premier League competitors allegedly asking for an investigation on where their funding comes from (Hytner and Aarons, 2023).

More importantly, the public can see through the perhaps cynical attempt to sportswash. This, therefore, means that the outcomes, laundering one's image through sport, are not completed as concentration, as well as being on the sport is also on the negative aspects of the image. Despite this, the entities have still spent the money on the attempt, so now they are poorer, but still known for their bad image. Given the following subsections, sportswashing in all its forms can never be free from negative connotations. So, is this an ethical approach to raising finance?

The ethical standpoint

The question that we will try to answer and consider in this section is whether sportswashing can ever be from an ethical standpoint. It is perhaps a silly question. The definition and very nature of sportswashing would suggest that it is always going to be an attempt to launder an image that is currently negatively impacting on whatever aims the organisation or country has. To that effect, it is probably not possible to be considered ethical when doing this.

If it were to ever be in any way ethical, the investment needs to come alongside reform. If the investment is the foot in the door, the reform is opening the door fully. Failure to

carry out the changes that wider society demands will leave the investment as sportswashing in the eye of the public, with the consequences that go with that not far behind. As we have seen, the impact of sportswashing can be felt far and wide; to bring this to life, we will focus now on some case studies.

Case studies

To provide some context for the issues of image laundering and sportswashing in contemporary society and sport, we will discuss the following case studies: the London 2012 Olympics and Various Football Clubs. The examples chosen will outline sportswashing and other considerations that we might come up against in the field of sport.

London 2012 Olympics

The London 2012 Olympics were the games of the 30th Olympiad. The aims of hosting the London games were complex and varied but based around changing the perception of London and the whole of the United Kingdom, as somewhere that was open for businesses and a vibrant place to live and work.

The modern discussion on sportswashing is often dominated by various pieces on Middle Eastern and post-Soviet states using sport in this fashion. But this is blinkered. Other nations, such as Germany, USA, and China have used sporting mega events, as well as the UK, to form positive perceptions in a consumer's mind.

Figure 5. Delivery of the Olympic torch to a barge on the River Thames



Source: [untitled image of the delivery of the Olympic torch], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3QXD70H>.

Has the Olympics ultimately been successful in its aims? On a domestic level, there have been improvements: better facilities and transport links have helped developed the corner of East London where the games were held into a vibrant area of the capital. Revenue within the borough and surrounding areas did go up in the years following the games. These positive changes have certainly been welcomed on a local and domestic level. However, there have been practical issues with some of the proposed benefits from facilities and a newfound love of physical activity in the population, not materialising the way it was envisaged because of governmental changes and increased costs of upkeep. From a political standpoint, it would look currently as though the hard work that went into the games to make the country more appealing in the eyes of the world has somewhat stalled. Subsequent governmental decisions, Brexit and a hostile immigration policy, the view of the country has perhaps been weakened in the international community. While the UK still hosts mega events, the hope of a long-lasting impact from the London games seems a distant memory.

Various football clubs

Given the role that football has in the world, it is not at all surprising that the sport has seen its furthest share of accusations of sportswashing. There has been a what appears to be never-ending stream of football club takeovers by wealthy individuals. It has now developed further as clubs that begin to get bought and owned by nation states or sponsored by companies tied to those countries.

The obvious examples that we can look to in this regard are Paris Saint Germain (Qatar), Newcastle United (Saudi Arabia), and Manchester City (United Arab Emirates). Each of these clubs has benefited from the resources of the nation states that have purchased them. PSG and Man City are now regularly winning domestic titles and fixtures in European competition. Newcastle is at the start of this journey but has been turned around from relegation candidates to title challengers.

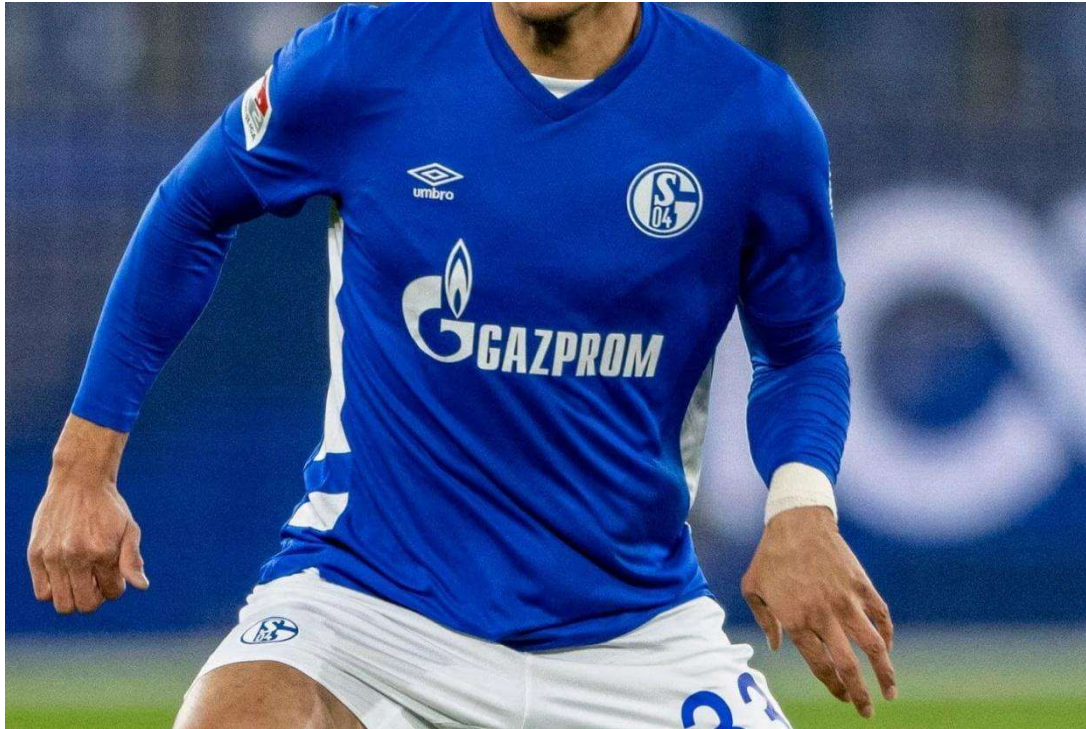
While this has been good for the clubs, and potentially for the competitions they enter, as it has brought increased attention and intrigue to them, it might not be the same for the fans. Some fans are against moves of this nature, as they fear it unbalances the league and, more seriously, turns their favourite sport into a new frontier of conflict. Nations can now use football and its biggest clubs as playthings. Fans themselves can be turned into apologists who will increasingly use social media to back the club and owners, regardless of context or knowledge.

While these teams are part of the discourse now, others have equally been used in this fashion. Schalke 04 from Germany was, for many years, sponsored by Gazprom, the Russian energy producer. In addition, Gazprom signed a sponsorship agreement with UEFA and sponsored Russian side, Zenit, with the 2022 Champions League Final due to played at Zenit's home, the Gazprom Arena. It now looks, after revelations regarding



Russia's hosting of mega events and the Ukraine War, that the sponsorship was yet another method of sportswashing. The sponsorship aimed to show, a softer, more financially giving organisation and, therefore, country.

Figure 6. Schalke to remove Gazprom logo from shirts after Russian 'escalation' in Ukraine



Source: [untitled image of Schalke to remove Gazprom logo from shirts], (n. d.), <https://bit.ly/3EdFKV5>.

It has not worked out that way with the sponsorship deals, with Schalke and UEFA, having been cancelled due to the invasion. What this shows is that, for some fans, the sportswashing is successful and that they will defend their clubs and owners against criticism. However, this only works to an extent, and not everything will be forgiven or defended. This is something that those seeking to launder or alter their image must remember. Only investment with real action is likely to be successful; otherwise, it will be seen for what it is: a cynical attempt to sportswash.

Summary

In this module, we have covered the concepts of image laundering and sportswashing, the history, methods, and the areas in which it is done. We then moved on to discuss the modern sportswashing environment, those who benefit from it, and the issues when undertaking sports washing practices.

We have considered whether sportswashing can ever be an ethical funding route and, if so, how, before outlining some contemporary examples through a series of case studies. Sportswashing in its current form is not the method of raising finance for sport or realising a profit. The model needs to be considered in partnership with reforms to assess and



change whatever issues there might be that are attempting to be laundered. Otherwise, there will be no rest from unwanted attention.

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