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Sportswashing in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

In light of recent sports investments conducted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in line with their ambitious Vision 2030, this thesis studies the extent to which these sports investments can be considered sportswashing. Sportswashing is understood as the attempt of a nation to improve its international reputation and image through hosting sporting events or investing in events, clubs or sports related organizations. Building upon soft power theories, this thesis seeks to contribute to the understanding of the interplay between sports and politics and fill the void of research conducted on Saudi sports investments. By applying a moderated constructivist perspective, a content analysis on Western media articles is conducted to investigate the sportswashing dynamics of the Saudi sports investments. These dynamics are highlighted through the development of a sportswashing framework which posits that incentives, tools and results govern how sportswashing is conducted. The analysis yields evidence that Western media sentiment surrounding Saudi sports investments are overwhelmingly negative rather than neutral or positive. As it is deemed that media shapes public opinion and importance is placed on the subjective perceptions of stakeholders, findings surrounding negative media sentiment portray the incentives for Saudi Arabia to conduct sportswashing. The tools by which they do so is elaborated through applying state capitalism theory in which the institutional dynamics between the regime and investment vehicles enable Saudi Arabia to conduct sports investments with strategic purposes. Finally, both direct and indirect allegations towards sportswashing highlights that Saudi sports investments are, to a large extent, considered sportswashing. It is further concluded that these sports investments are not executed for financial purposes, reinforcing the finding that they are done for sportswashing purposes. Further research is introduced as the potential for longitudinal studies to assess how sportswashing can be pertained to some countries but not others, through media sentiment analyses of Formula 1 host nations.

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Introduction

In the fall of 2021, The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia acquired an 80% stake in the English football club Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) and since 2016, the country has spent billions of dollars on hosting sporting events. This acquisition comes on the back end of numerous investments seeking to fasten the name of Saudi Arabia on international sport. The decision is backboned by Crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman's ambitious Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 project that seeks to modernize and prepare the Kingdom for a post-oil era (Thompson, 2017). This vision is a strategic plan and web of policies that has been created with the effort of diversifying the source of income for Saudi Arabia away from oil (Nurunnabi, 2017). A significant part of the Saudi Vision 2030 is the role of sports investments which is the major point of interest of this thesis. As Saudi Arabia is stretching its arms for investments and becoming increasingly bold in their hosting prospects and acquisitions, so are the controversies surrounding their nation. Contemporary scholars have increasingly dictated the understanding that states with tarnished international reputations are susceptible to use sport as a method to improve their international reputation and image (Chadwick, 2018; Chadwick, 2022; Galily et Al., 2016; Marshall et Al., 2022). Due to the recency of Saudi Arabia's investments little research is to be found surrounding the core reasonings behind sport as a pillar for their strategic roadmap. As a result, this thesis will seek to contribute to the understanding that Saudi sports investments are done for the purpose of sportswashing, leveraging sport to increase soft power and improve international reputation.

To fill the void of research on Saudi sports investments and sportswashing, this paper will seek to answer the question *to what extent can Saudi sports investments be considered sportswashing?* To answer this question, we will develop a three-part framework that explains the incentives, tools and results of conducting sportswashing. We deem that *extent* can be determined by how the case of Saudi Arabia fits this three-part framework. Firstly, incentives explain *why* conduct sportswashing, secondly, the tools explain *how* to conduct sportswashing and, finally, the results explain *what* can be considered sportswashing. The framework is advanced through quantitative and qualitative content analysis of media articles. This methodological approach follows research conducted on similar cases to what this paper is concerned with, underscoring both the relevance within academic literature and the appropriateness of the paper's point of departure. Being informed by moderate constructivism, this research places emphasis on the importance of the role of ideas and beliefs. As sportswashing is in essence a perspective attained to sports investments with the goal of improving one's reputation or

image, it is governed by the ideational elements of society. This is also the reasoning behind our choice of analysis, as we deem media sentiment, providing the importance of ideas and beliefs, are critical indicators of the incentives, tools and results of sportswashing. By engaging in the academic debate on whether Saudi Arabia's sports investments can be considered sportswashing, we also seek to evaluate whether such actions can actually be successful in doing so. In this sense, success would be measured by the view that sports investments have led to an improvement of the state-investor's international reputation.

Throughout the paper, continuous references are made to sportswashing and sports investments. We will define sports investments as the act of using funds to acquire sports clubs, investing in infrastructure related to sports, competitions or events with the purpose of running or hosting them. There can be a plethora of reasons for actors to invest in sport, but we will make the case that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia do so for soft power purposes, washing their tarnished international reputation. In contemporary literature, this concept is called sportswashing and is defined as the phenomenon and concept in which a country leverages sports to improve its image and reputation (Chadwick, 2018). This can be done through investing, hosting or partaking in various sports events, competitions or organizations. Saudi investments are defined as investments carried out by the Saudi state. This thesis acknowledges that the sports investments considered are executed by the Public Investment Fund (PIF), and thus not directly the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The development of state capitalism in the theory section of the paper argues, however, that any investment conducted by PIF is also, either wholly or largely, carried out by the state given the close ties between PIF and the Saudi regime.

The point of departure for this thesis is a presentation of previous academic literature involved with the topics that this thesis discusses and contributes to understanding the gap in literature that it will attempt to fill. The literature review consists of a three-part discussion looking at the academic literature surrounding sports as a tool for diplomacy, soft power and sportswashing academia. The literature on sportswashing is of particular relevance as it serves as a guiding framework for the methodological approach to this thesis' research. Thereafter, sportswashing, soft power and state capitalism are developed as the theoretical perspectives employed throughout the paper. This leads to the introduction of the research design. The methodology of this thesis is content analysis whereby the explanatory sequential method is applied. Herein, an initial phase of quantitative analysis is followed by a qualitative analysis of the content. The quantitative results of the analysis therefore acts

as a springboard for the qualitative analysis. The penultimate section presents the analysis of the research. Herein, the analysis is broken up into the three-part structure of the sportswashing framework that is introduced in the theory chapter. The analysis is followed by a discussion of the findings and alternative methods to approach our research.

Literature review

Before beginning the discussion about the effectiveness of sports diplomacy, the understanding of the nature of its existence must be explored. International relations scholars, in different schools of thought, pertain significantly different understandings to sports diplomacy and disagree on the viability of the theory. For example, with its state centrism and views on the importance of security, realists would show little support for leveraging sports as a means of managing inter-state relations (Baker et al., 2017). On the other hand, liberal scholars advocate for influence over power in managing peace time relations. Keohane and Nye Jr (2001) emphasize the importance of new technologies and the ways in which states interact with each other in times of peace as explanations for arising conflict. As such, liberal scholars are concerned with innovative ways of managing relations such as economic diplomacy, cyber diplomacy and, importantly, sports diplomacy (Baker et al., 2017). Pigman (2010) contributes to this understanding and argues that international sporting events enhance inter-state cooperation and understanding ever since the Olympic games in ancient Greece. Trunkos and Heere (2017) further develop this view and create a framework of objectives that sports diplomacy yields. This includes (1) providing a setting for leaders to start dialogue (2) providing a look into the host country and educate others about it (3) bridging cultural differences through sports (4) providing a platform for trade agreements and (5, 6, 7) spreading awareness, creating a legacy and, finally, creating legitimacy.

The ability to use sports as a diplomatic tool goes beyond the judgement of political and economic ideologies that deem whether or not it is feasible. In fact, some scholars argue that the importance of sports transcends even cultural tendencies and personal beliefs (Allison, 1993). In 1993, Lincoln Allison critiqued the theory of the ‘autonomy of sport’, being the view that politics and sport are isolated from one another, in his work “Sport and Civil Society”. Within this theory, it is argued that some people view sports as a trivial subject matter, separate to society where people deem it either within or outside the political dimensions of social life (Ibid.) However, viewing sports as something

that lives isolated and free from politics or conflicts should be rejected as the two are clearly connected because sports impact politics, social classes and the distribution of economic resources (Ibid.; Budd, 2001). Sports is a commodity, too valuable to ignore within foreign affairs (Jackson & Haigh, 2008) and any attempt at isolating sports from politics is unrealistic due to the reciprocal relationship of influence between the two. Evidently, sport is important for politics and vice versa allowing the case for sport diplomacy to be reiterated. As a result of globalization, corporations, individuals and multilateral organizations can represent their state, and importantly for sports, it gives them an arena by which they can reach millions of people. The argument that sports is becoming an indirect tool for diplomacy and a tool for achieving soft power is further developed by Baker et al. (2017).

Sports can serve as a medium through which state heads and institutional investors can meet and discuss current affairs and put host nations in the international limelight. It is argued that as a result of this, soft power increases for the host nation arising from the increased attraction towards that state because they have been able to leverage sports to become a venue for discussion and negotiation (Baker et al., 2017). Nye Jr (1990) was pivotal in the separation of the academic understanding of power into hard and soft sources. Nye Jr departed from the works of Morgenthau (1948), Dahl (1957) and Deutsch (1967), who traditionally saw power as the ability to exert influence by advocating for the importance of culture, democratic values and human rights (Baker et al., 2017) - elements that influence power. Nye Jr sees that soft power shapes foreign public opinion whilst stemming from culture, ideologies and foreign policies, inadvertently making sports a cause for soft power. This is underlined in Berg (2021) and in Jackson & Haigh (2008) who argue sports hold significant importance and influence; not only shown by its number of events, viewership or attendants, but by its cultural and symbolic “currency”. To highlight the potential for leveraging sports as a means of soft power, international soft power rankings showed that France was given a significant boost after winning the world cup in 2018 (Chadwick, 2022). By answering the research question, this paper can contribute to the academic understanding that sports diplomacy is tangible and a cause for soft power.

The goal of attaining soft power through sports diplomacy can often be tainted by the nascent topic of sportswashing, primarily developed by British professor Simon Chadwick (2018).

Sportswashing is defined as the concept of seeking to improve a countries unfavorable reputation by investing in sports (Chadwick, 2022). Although the term sportswashing is relatively new, as a phenomenon it has been around for some time. This is evidenced by the Gulf states of the Middle East herein Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait and Oman having spent excessively on sport to reap the

benefits of sports' global presence and influence, hence branding and marketing themselves, as early as the 1990's (Whitson Macintosh, 1998). Amara & Garcia (2018) add that the economic strategy of direct and indirect investments from Gulf states have increased the influence (soft power) of the Middle East and impacted the staging of international sporting events, sponsorship of top football clubs and investment in television broadcasts. The term sportswashing is, however, often one that is culturally prescribed by the West to countries that are ideologically and morally opposed to them (Chadwick, 2022). Whilst sports can certainly improve the image of hosts, the inability to control media exposure surrounding the event can highlight a plethora of negatives about the host nation (Giffard & Rivenburgh, 2000), suggesting that national branding through sports can go one of two ways. The two way nature of sportswashing was assessed in two case studies concerning the 2008 Olympics in Beijing by Alf and Preuss (2011) and the 2022 FIFA¹World Cup in Qatar by Galily et al. (2016). These two papers conducted research on media sentiment surrounding the cases and their findings empirically concluded what Giffard & Rivenburgh had theorized in 2000. This is further developed by Trunkos and Heere (2017), who highlight more specific problems in host nations that headlined during past sporting events. These claims are further strengthened by the corruption allegations against FIFA and the IOC². Examples include domestic disputes with Tibet leading up to the Beijing Olympics, economic inequality in South Africa in relation to the FIFA World Cup 2010 and home evictions and water pollution in Brazil in relation to the FIFA World Cup 2014 (Trunkos & Heere, 2017). The literature on sportswashing in Saudi Arabia, however, is limited (Chadwick, 2022), and requires analysis to determine whether Saudi investments in sports can be considered sportswashing. This paper, therefore, seeks to contribute to the literature by highlighting the case of Saudi Arabia and contribute to that understanding.

Other developing economies, especially those in the Middle East, have received lots of attention in the media for investing in sporting events and sports teams. Examples include Abu Dhabi acquiring Manchester City Football Club, Qatar purchasing Paris Saint-Germain and Qatar hosting the FIFA world cup in 2022. There might be several reasons why nations choose to invest in sports, such as increasing revenue during the time of the event and increasing tourism (Reda & Viviez, 2020). Other research has focused on whether the acquisition of sports events is done to improve the image of nations conducting the investment (sportswashing). For example, Alf & Preuss (2011) focused on the

¹ Fédération Internationale de Football Association

² International Olympic Committee

image of China during, and after, the nation hosted the 2008 Olympic games. This thesis, similarly, considers this image-perspective, as it is, i.a., theoretically guided by the notion of

sportswashing. Further research conducted by Qing, et al (2013) suggests that when China hosted the Olympic Games, the tone towards China, in American and British newspapers, improved (Qing, et al., 2013). Gries, et al (2010), on the other hand, found that the Olympic games did not contribute to improving China's international image - in some dimensions, it even worsened (Gries, et al., 2010). Moreover, Syed (2012) found that, while the tone towards China improved in the American media as a result of the Olympics, the public opinion on China improved only marginally (Syed, 2012; Kobierecki & Strożek, 2020). Furthermore, Kobierecki and Strożek (2020) researched the degree of the increase in interest in host-nations of Olympic Games and FIFA World Cups based on google searches. They concluded that hosting mega sporting events increases interest in the host nation. However, they acknowledged that an increase in interest might not necessarily be a product of an improvement of the host's image (Kobierecki & Strożek, 2020). The authors conducted a quantitative analysis of host nation interest based on Google searches and thus lack qualitative assessment to be able to determine the sentiment and the nature of the increase in interest. On a last note, they found that an alternative approach for a nation to improve its international image through sports investments (sportswashing) is to purchase a sports club. An activity that the Middle East, as mentioned, has a recent track record of doing (Kobierecki & Strożek, 2020). This thesis is inspired by the quantitative research of Kobierecki & Strożek (2020) but seeks to go to one step further by adding a qualitative assessment of the sentiment towards its case of interest, Saudi Arabia's sports investments.

According to the Guardian (2021), Saudi Arabia has spent at least USD 1.5 billion on hosting highprofile, international sporting events since 2014. These events include several Formula 1 Grand Prix, high-profile boxing, as well as handball and football cup finals. The U.S.-Saudi Business Council (USSBC) (2020) emphasizes hosting international sports events as a viable strategy for Saudi Arabia to capture lucrative sponsorship deals and partnership opportunities. Likewise, the USSBC highlights Saudi Arabia's NEOM project that aims to create the most physically active city in the world, conducive to attracting international sporting events and foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country. Reda & Viviez (2021) estimate that the Saudi investments into megaprojects within sports, such as NEOM, and hosting international sporting events will not only entail the direct economic impact from ticket-revenue, sponsorships, etc., but will also be the main driver of increasing

general tourism in Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Reda & Viviez (2021) note that sports' contribution to Saudi GDP has already increased from USD 2.4 billion in 2016 to USD 6.9 billion in 2019, and with Saudi Arabia currently representing just 0.9% of the global sporting events industry, they see great potential for development. Likewise, Abuzayed (2013) showed, by example of the 2022 Qatar World Cup announcement, how the hosting of international sporting events boosts the national stock market and attracts investments that exceed the costs associated with hosting the event.

Grand & Wolff (2020) emphasize how Saudi sports investments are not confined to the Saudi economy, (though considerable amounts are being spend here as well). Saudi Arabia has already acquired the English football club NUFC and the country is allegedly close to acquiring a range of high-profile sports brands in Europe, such as Italian Serie A football club Inter Milan and French Ligue 1 football club Olympique de Marseille (MEMO, 2022). These international sports investments happen through the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, PIF, which Grand & Wolff (2021) argue, carries out diplomacy on behalf of the Saudi government through their strategic sports investments. PIF, controlled by the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Mohammad bin Salman, has more than USD 600 billion worth of assets under management and is purposed with investing on behalf of the Saudi government. However, the investments of PIF, especially their sports investments, have been intensely scrutinized and criticized internationally. PIF's 2021 acquisition of NUFC sparked controversy as international media called it a clear example of sportswashing; media argued it was an attempt to rebrand Saudi Arabia and make people forget about the country's human rights violations³. The literature on Saudi sportswashing is sparse, but McPherson-Smith (2021) argues that the PIF now has become extremely aware of the added risk of negative public perception when investing in western economies that might name the investment an attempt of sportswashing.

Although sportswashing, coined in 2018 by Amnesty International (Zidan, 2019), as a term is relatively new, the practice of sportswashing is not and examining earlier attempts of sportswashing provides a context for understanding the case of Saudi Arabia. One of the earliest attempts of sportswashing is the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, known as 'the Nazi Olympics' (Amnesty International, 2022). Before being awarded the games in 1931, Germany had showed no interest in

³ Here are a few examples:

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2020/nov/05/f1-confirm-saudi-arabia-2021-race-in-face-of-human-rights-criticismformula-one-motor-sport> - accessed 23/05-2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/dec/01/f1-under-pressure-to-speak-out-against-saudi-human-right-abuses> - accessed 23/05-2022

<https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/amnesty-voices-human-rights-concerns-saudi-takeover-newcastle-looms-202110-07/> - accessed 23/05-2022

For further examples, see the appendix.

the Olympics. On the contrary, they considered Aryans competing with ‘inferior races’ a disgrace and even resented the idea of athletes from the allied countries competing with German athletes (Brewster & Brewster, 2020). However, when they hosted it anyway, it was because the German Olympic Organizing Committee convinced Hitler that hosting would be an invaluable propaganda opportunity (Ibid.). Thus, the hosting of the 1936 Summer Olympics had no economic or sporting purpose, but was purely a political propaganda tool. In sum, by leveraging sports, the German state sought to improve its international image by using an international sporting event as a vehicle for sportswashing.

Preuss & Alfs (2011) argue that the Beijing Olympics 2008 was yet another attempt from a host nation with a tainted human rights record and weak international reputation to rebrand itself. In 2008, China’s international image was tainted by the suppression of political opponents and the prohibition of free press which made several large organizations call for a boycott of the event (Primiano & Xiang, 2016). To rebrand itself, the Chinese government hosted the most expensive Summer Olympics yet, in an attempt to create the perfect Olympic event (Rabinovitch, 2008). This was, according to Preuss & Alfs (2011), done to attract new business partners and investors, through an improved Chinese image, by demonstrating the nation’s economic prowess. However, Li & Kaplanidou (2011) argue that the Olympic Games had little to no effect on U.S. citizens’ perception of China, while Preuss & Alfs (2011) argue that the negative media coverage significantly limited the opportunity for China to improve its image.

According to Samuel-Azran et al. (2016), Dubai acquiring a majority ownership share of the French sports brand Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) in 2011, through a subsidiary of the Qatari sovereignwealth fund, is one of the earliest attempts of using the acquisition of a foreign high-profile sports brand to improve a nation’s image. The purpose of the move, Samuel-Azran et al. argues, is an attempt from Qatar to improve its international reputation and increase its soft power, which Dorsey (2016) argues is a key strategic goal for the Qatari security. Similar to the findings of Preuss & Alfs (2021), this acquisition could also be seen as a way for Qatar to showcase their economic capacity. Ranking fourth on the list of football clubs with most fans globally (Jones, 2021), PSG is an invaluable opportunity and platform for Qatar to improve its image and increase its soft power (Reiche, 2014). Likewise, in a massive deal, Qatar became the first ever nation to sponsor the shirts of Spanish football club FC

Barcelona, which is known as “the most prestigious advertising space in the world” (Conn, 2017). This can be seen as another attempt to use global sports as a branding vehicle.

Theory

Soft power

In this paper, soft power is the overarching theoretical perspective from which the research question will be answered. The theory will be used as the theoretical foundation for the use of the sportswashing concept and will provide a framework to recognize and describe the practice of sportswashing. Firstly, this section will explain the theory of soft power and define key concepts. This is followed by a section justifying the relevancy of the soft power theory. Lastly, soft power will be put into the context of sportswashing and a framework for analyzing sports investments through a sportswashing lens will be extracted from the soft power theory.

The soft power theory was fathered by Joseph S. Nye Jr in his 1990 book *Bound to Lead*, and the American political scientist has since evolved and refined the concept (de Martino, 2020). In this work, Nye Jr introduced the division of power into hard and soft power. He describes the concept of soft power as the ability of a country to set the agenda of other countries through attraction rather than via coercion. Contrarily, hard power is the military and economic capability of one country to coerce other countries into acting in a desired way. Moreover, even states with a high degree of hard power cannot reject the necessity of soft power if they are to be successful in world politics, (Nye Jr, 2004). Soft power, according to the initial theory as put forward by Nye Jr, stems from three resources. The first of these being the country’s political values and the ability of the country to live up to them. The second resource is the country’s foreign policies and whether they are regarded as legitimate by other countries. The last resource is the culture of the country and the extent to which it is attractive to foreign entities. If a country can wield any of, or all these three resources, to a degree that makes other countries admire it and aspire to it, the country may successfully achieve desired outcomes in international relations and foreign policy spheres (Nye Jr, 2011). However, although the use of soft power can be quite effective, the effect often takes years to manifest (Nye, 2004).

Hall (2010) further expands the framework to include an additional three sources of soft power. These are characterized by being more concrete than the sources of Nye Jr. They were added by Hall, as he argued that the three initial sources, political values, foreign policy and culture, did not fully explain the source of attraction. The first of the three additional sources of soft power is institutions. This source refers to whether the country has any prominent and legitimate roles in international

institutions. Next, the second source of soft power, named representation by Hall (2010), is the extent to which a country can control the perception of issues, promote its own interpretations, and influence others' beliefs. The last source of soft power is reputation. This source is dependent on successes, typically cultural or economic ones, in the international arena that can create credibility for the country. Like the original three sources of soft power articulated by Nye Jr (2011), these sources may also be leveraged to achieve political goals in the international arena.

Nye Jr emphasizes the descriptive rather than normative nature of the soft power concept. It is neither worse nor better to utilize soft power compared to hard power. As Nye explains "It is not necessarily better to twist minds than to twist arms" (Nye, 2011, p.81). Soft power, like any kind of power, can be used for various purposes, including purposes that can be perceived as nefarious (Nye Jr, 2011). Another important notion is that soft power is not dependent on hard power. This is, arguably, best exemplified by the Vatican state that has next to no hard power but is endowed with a very high degree of soft power through its function as the home of the Catholic church (Nye Jr, 2004).

The justification for and relevance of using soft power in this thesis is the increasingly complex dynamics of the international political arena (Nye Jr., 2004) and the link between soft power sources and the practice of sportswashing. The agenda of international politics is no longer based solely on the relative hard power, military and economic might, between nations. To a higher degree than ever, the effective use of soft power is needed to secure the desired political outcome (Rugh, 2009). Perhaps the best example of this is the US military campaign in Iraq that was successful in removing Saddam Hussein but failed to establish democracy and lasting peace in the region (de Martino, 2020). Moreover, hard power has experienced rising costs as military campaigns come at the cost of welfare for developed countries and might jeopardize the attraction of investors in developing countries. The use of hard power might even undermine a country's political goals in the long run if it creates or increases resentment towards the country, as in the case of the US in the Iraq war, even if the country was initially successful in utilizing hard power to obtain its political goal (Rugh, 2009). This notion of the increased costs of hard power and the entailed avoidance of using it, is one of the key pillars of Chinese foreign policy since 1976, where China has actively sought to avoid the use of hard power and instead focused – quite successfully – on soft power to strengthen its position in the international political arena (Huang, 2010). Thus, the soft power theory describes a viable international political strategy (Nye Jr, 2004), and can be effective in describing the intention of countries' political moves, such as large new investments strategies, in the international arena.

Sportswashing

In order to assess Saudi sports investments from a sportswashing perspective, we must first develop the theory behind it. Sportswashing was a term first coined by Amnesty International in 2018 in light of a growing number of regimes using sport to improve their international reputation tarnished by human rights violations (Zidan, 2019). Chadwick (2018) was one of the first scholars to scientifically investigate the phenomenon and has since been a frontrunner in expanding the field of sportswashing. Similar to concepts of greenwashing and whitewashing, sportswashing can be considered as the way in which a nation leverages sport to appeal to its audiences or members in order to improve their image. This can be done through hosting, partaking, or investing in events, teams or sporting organizations. A framework that explains the dynamics of sportswashing can be extracted from the soft power theory when combined with the literature review. Firstly, the concept of sportswashing is dependent on the theoretical foundations of the soft power theory. Sportswashing can only be efficient and theoretically accepted if the notion that countries can achieve political goals through means such as culture, reputation and representation - i.e., soft power – is also accepted. The incentive to sportswash occurs when the political values and foreign policy of a country are perceived as unattractive by the countries that the sportswashing country seeks to influence. Specifically, if the political values are misaligned or if foreign policy is viewed as illegitimate. For example, this could stem from differing views on the importance of human rights or if military campaigns are perceived as unjust. Similarly, the opportunity to practice sportswashing occurs when a country can achieve soft power through the three sources presented by Hall (2010), namely their reputation, institutions and presentation, as well as the soft power source of culture (Nye Jr, 2004). The ability to successfully practice sportswashing is dependent on a country's ability to extract soft power from reputational successes, for example through the successful hosting of global sporting events, such as Formula 1, or through the sporting success of acquired international sports brands. Furthermore, sportswashing might be conducted institutionally if the country can obtain an important role in one of the significant international sports institutions, such as FIFA or IOC. Both means of sportswashing might be seen as a platform for further sportswashing if the country can use them to facilitate a beneficial representation of the country's characteristics that are perceived as unattractive to extract additional soft power.³

³ This framework is summarized in figure 1 below.

Through the lens of sportswashing, we are able to theorize how sporting events and investments, as symbols of progress, can be utilized as rebranding tools. Exerting soft power through sports is an ongoing process (Chadwick, 2018) and before Saudi Arabia can cement itself as a sporting destination it needs to change its perception in the West. Wielding any of the six soft power sources⁴, however, is not easy as different parts of populations respond differently to the ideas and images of the soft power-seeking, sportswashing country. In fact, an attempt to obtain soft power to increase political influence can repel countries instead of attracting them, thereby decreasing soft power (Codevilla, 2008). Likewise, the capability of a country to extract soft power from its soft power resources, especially in connection to its political values, depends on the context as, for example, what is perceived as attractive political values differentiate between different nations (Nye Jr, 2011). Thus, the attempt to practice sportswashing, or to increase soft power in any form, is dependent on the acceptance of the recipient. If unaccepted, a political manoeuvre to increase soft power, for example

⁴ We acknowledge that the list of six sources of soft power is not exhaustive, and that other scholars have further expanded the framework, for example the cognitive, affective and normative dimensions articulated by Shin Wha-Lee (2011). However, due to the limited scope of this paper and for the purpose of generating a sportswashing framework, we will stick to just these six sources presented by Nye Jr (2004) and Hall (2010).

sportswashing, is likely to have the reverse effect and hinder the country's ability to achieve its political goals (Ibid.).

Figure 1. The dynamics of sportswashing.

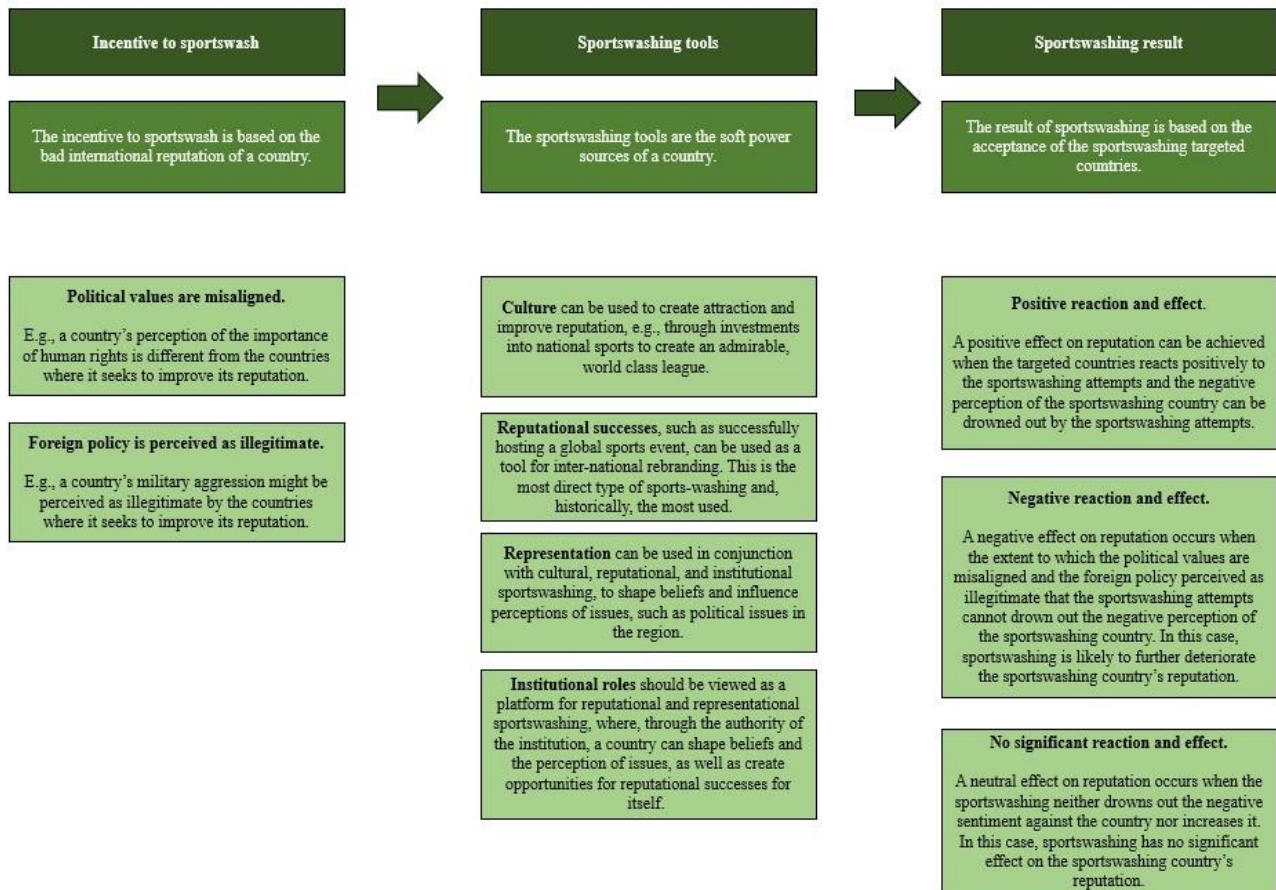


Figure 1. A framework that gives an overview of the dynamics of sportswashing, extracted from the soft power theory of Nye Jr (2011) and Hall (2010) as well as the current literature on sportswashing. (Authors, 2022)

NOTE: This is a framework developed by the authors of this thesis, in lack of existing sportswashing frameworks that allow a more systematic view of sports investments. Moreover, figure 1 is a simplified overview, and the framework is described in more detail in the theory section above and will be further elaborated on when utilized in the analysis section of the paper.

State capitalism: The institutional dynamics that enable sportswashing

As mentioned, PIF is the sovereign wealth fund (SWF) of Saudi Arabia, led by chairman Mohammad Bin Salman, the crown prince of the kingdom. To develop the framework for sportswashing and the state capitalist lens, we must first consider the role of PIF. We deem this is necessary for being able to claim that sports investments are done on behalf of the Saudi state. As a result, introducing PIF introduces the role, strategy and intent behind sports investments in Saudi Arabia. The fund is

responsible for driving the Saudi Vision 2030 agenda through strategic investments both domestically and internationally (Grand & Wolff, 2020). In 2018, the IPO of government owned oil company Aramco was key to PIF becoming the world's largest SWF (Ramady, 2018) where the sale of shares injected 70 billion USD into the fund (Grand & Wolff, 2020). This showcases critical synergies between state owned entities and the ease of financing investment opportunities. Furthermore, extending PIF's financing role to the state, it also now conducts public diplomacy on behalf of Saudi Arabia (Grand & Wolff, 2020). Extending the argument of the relationship between the state and PIF, the SWF is known to be more absent of collective decision-making, comparative to other domestic institutions where it is highly personalistic and closely tied with individual visions of its leadership (Young, 2020). Ties between PIF and the Saudi ruling family is further strengthened by the recent shifts in the organizational makeup of PIF that mirrors the centralization of power in the Saudi ruling family (Trudelle, 2022). Due to this, the investments carried out by PIF have faced non-regulatory political risks in Western markets in the wake of the death of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 (McPherson-Smith, 2021) to which Mohammad Bin Salman has been linked (Barnes & Sanger, 2021). As a result of the core similarities and crossover between the Saudi ruling family and the leadership of PIF and its role within the Saudi Vision 2030, PIF essentially becomes the vehicle by which Saudi Arabia conduct their investments and public diplomacy. Thus, we deem that it is appropriate to consider PIF investments as state investments allowing us to utilize the state capitalist framework.

The role of PIF has come under scrutiny in light of the acquisition of English Premier League club NUFC. The first stories regarding the Saudi interest to acquire the football club made headlines in 2019 and the first attempt fell through. The deal was revised as PIF followed up in October of 2021 by successfully purchasing an 80% equity stake in the club, with PCP Capital Partners and Rueben Brothers Sports & Media purchasing 10% each (Kelsey, 2021). The latter bid was made possible as the consortium of purchasers had made legally binding assurances to the Premier League that the takeover was not led by the state of Saudi Arabia (Marshall et al., 2022). Considering the makeup of PIF, however, and the role it plays in navigating strategic investments on behalf of the Saudi state, it is difficult to ensure the integrity of the Premier League's decision.

Very central to the core of this thesis is, as mentioned, the theoretical notion of state capitalism. Traditionally, this notion has been said to exist when a given state owns and manages state-owned enterprises (SOEs), which, as argued, is the case with Saudi sports investments conducted by PIF.

These claims are further developed in Musacchio et al. (2015). Similarly, Bremmer (2010) explains that state capitalism has several traits. First, the state dominates markets by owning major corporations that primarily seek to serve national interests and, secondly, use the markets to extend political power (Bremmer, 2010). Consequently, the theory of state capitalism is vital, in order to explore the role of Saudi sports investments, not least because PIF is owned and managed by the Saudi Kingdom. State capitalism, in its nature, is not uniform. Musacchio et al. (2015) have introduced a distinction between four broad varieties of state capitalism: wholly owned SOEs, the state as a majority investor, the state as a minority investor, and the state as a strategic supporter of specific sectors. Departing from the framework introduced by Musacchio et al. (2015), this thesis argues that Saudi sports investments fall under two of four categories: wholly owned SOEs and the state as a majority investor. The reason for the distinction between those varieties of state capitalism is that principal-agent problems have occurred with a traditional uniform understanding of state capitalism as a consequence of the theoretical notion of “liability of stateness” (Musacchio et al., 2015). That is, if the state is too involved in business, the endeavors of firms are negatively influenced according to three different theoretical views, managerial agency, social view, and political view.

According to managerial agency, the problem with state capitalism, and SOEs in general, is twofold. First, agency theorists claim that managers of SOEs are poorly selected. Second, managers of SOEs lack incentives to pursue efficiency and profitability (Musacchio et al., 2015). Regarding the former problem, the idea is that it is common to find members of the ruling political coalition in top management positions of SOEs, at least relative to that of private firms. Relationally, governments are typically tempted to appoint their cronies and bureaucrats as board members of SOEs who have little or no incentive to scrutinize managers and veto inefficient suggestions (Musacchio et al., 2015). Regarding the latter problem, compensation schemes in the public sector are often linked to follow bureaucratic criteria, such as hierarchy and seniority, rather than financial performance (Musacchio et al., 2015). Thus, the perspective of managerial agency predicts that increasing state control will worsen firm efficiency as well as the way firms are run. As PIF is a wholly owned SOE, those problems are apparent. E.g., as the crown prince of the kingdom is the chairman of PIF, not only are cronies and bureaucrats of politicians board members, but the de facto leader of the kingdom has the most powerful position in the fund.

The social view predicts that governments direct SOEs to pursue social objectives which clash with profitability of the firm. E.g., governments might force or incentivize SOEs to switch to less profitable

customer segments, keep prices low, or invest in geographically remote areas (Musacchio et al., 2015). When this happens with listed SOEs, an agency problem arises as managers will have to consider both profitability and complex social objectives (Musacchio et al., 2015). Instances of these social objectives that clash with firm profitability could also be sports investments. As this thesis partially examines how sports investments influence the international reputation of Saudi Arabia, said social objective is considered particularly relevant for answering the research question of this thesis. The political view, just as the perspective of managerial agency and the social view, predicts negative effects of state ownership in firm-level performance. The point put forth by this view is that politicians running SOEs and/or their cronies might use the firms to obtain political gain. That is, SOEs may carry out projects and investments with low or negative private and/or social value if they generate political gain to the politicians running SOEs and their coalitions. This is of particular relevance for PIF as it is managed and owned by the Saudi regime.

The first type of state capitalism is that of wholly owned SOEs which is the most traditional type of government ownership. In this variety, governments both own and manage SOEs as extensions of the public bureaucracy (Musacchio et al., 2015). In the 19th century, this variety gained popularity, as governments started managing a plethora of public goods such as water, electricity, and public transportation (Musacchio et al., 2015). As those types of SOEs possess limited transparency and are funded and highly influenced by governments, they are often considered as state ownership with dysfunctional governance traits. To understand whether it fits society to have these types of SOEs, it is vital to look through different perspectives, as they might very well disagree as to whether those types of SOEs are efficient. On the one hand, from an institution-based view, wholly owned SOEs might be necessary if private entrepreneurship is insufficient in certain areas such as education and infrastructure. However, wholly owned SOEs might also be subjects of severe costs that worsen performance, according to the perspectives of managerial agency, social view, and political view, i.e., liability of stateness (Musacchio et al., 2015). As mentioned, this type of state capitalism is one considered focal by this thesis. The reason being that PIF plays a prevalent role in strategically developing the Saudi economy and in conducting sports investments. Moreover, PIF is wholly owned by the Saudi Kingdom, and thus considered a wholly owned SOE.

Next, the variety of state capitalism in which the state is regarded as a majority investor refers to entities in which the state remains a controlling shareholder, but simultaneously creates mechanisms

to attract private investors. For instance, many of the largest national oil companies in the world are listed on stock exchanges and follow governance practices that resemble those of private companies (Musacchio & Lazzarini, 2014). The national oil company of Saudi Arabia, Saudi Aramco, is no exception. Moreover, these SOEs have board members that are external and independent, managers with technical expertise, and performance-related executive salaries (Musacchio et al., 2015). When the state introduces mechanisms which attract private investors, as is the case with this type of SOEs, many of the problems related to liability of stateness are addressed. E.g., as board members are external, they are incentivized to scrutinize and challenge the strategies put forth by executives. This minimizes the chance of the SOE conducting investments and engaging in projects that might be socially beneficial but at the expense of firm profitability (Musacchio et al., 2015). In the case of Saudi Arabia, this type of state capitalism is also prevalent. As mentioned, the proceeds obtained from publicly listing Saudi Aramco on the stock exchange have been invested in PIF, making PIF the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world (Ramady, 2018). Here, the controlling shareholder nature of the Saudi regime is apparent as funds from stock listing was invested in PIF rather than reinvested in Aramco. These funds could have gone towards further strengthening the economic capacity of Aramco and fueling their green transition. As PIF is meant to finance the Saudi Vision 2030, and thus conduct sports investments, the 'state-as-a-majority-investor' variety of state capitalism which is present in Saudi Arabia, is critical to Saudi Arabian sports investments, and thus, plays a critical theoretical role of this thesis.

The state as a minority investor, on the other hand, is a type of state capitalism that is not deemed relevant in terms of Saudi Arabian sports investments. The rationale for this assessment is that, as it is PIF that is to finance the Saudi Vision 2030, the government plays a very important role, e.g., the crown prince is the chairman of PIF. Regarding the type of state capitalism in which the state is a minority investor, the role of the government is far from that prevalent. The type of state capitalism where the state acts as a strategic supporter of specific sectors is not deemed relevant to Saudi sports investments either. As it is the PIF financing the vast majority of said investments, the state as a strategic supporter is not prevalent as a type of state capitalism in this context, as this variety speaks to industrial policies pursued by the government to incentivize *privately* owned entities to invest in specific sectors (Musacchio et al., 2015). Hence, this thesis analyses Saudi Arabia's sports investments through the theoretical framework of state capitalism where particularly two varieties are considered focal, wholly owned SOE and the state as a majority investor.

Methodology

Philosophy of Science

This thesis takes the philosophical standpoint of moderated constructivism. As we seek to investigate whether sportswashing is occurrent in Saudi sports investments, constructivism is the most appropriate philosophical position. The reason is that sportswashing, by definition, regards improving the image of the sportswasher through sports investments. Since any image or reputation is exceedingly subjective, sportswashing cannot exist independently of social constructs, such as ideas and beliefs. Consequently, in terms of exploring the degree to which sportswashing is apparent, great importance must be attached to social constructs. Relationally, Vyas (2013) argues that the most fitting philosophical position to study soft power – and by extension, sportswashing – is indeed constructivism. His point is, similarly, that constructivism is the only philosophical position which grasps social complexities that must be considered in the study of soft power (Vyas, 2013).

Moving forward, moderated constructivism takes the ontological perspective of realism. Thus, moderated constructivists believe that social reality exists independently of the human mind, despite attaching great importance to human beliefs and ideas. Thus, moderated constructivism conflicts with strong constructivism which takes the standpoint of ontological idealism. That is, one objective social reality does not exist, as ‘reality’, in its nature, consists of human ideas and is a creation of the human mind (Buch-Hansen, 2021). In accordance with moderated constructivism, this thesis, in its analysis of 78 articles regarding Saudi sports investments, places great importance to social constructs. However, it is assumed that the existence of one social reality might be construed in many ways, reiterating the importance of social constructs. Thus, in this thesis, social phenomena are regarded impressionably, but also to have features independently of the interpretations of them (Buch-Hansen, 2010). This will be further elaborated on in the discussion section of this thesis.

Epistemologically, in terms of explaining social phenomena, the constructivist perspective makes it the goal of the research to obtain deep knowledge of social constructs and their impact with great focus on ideational, rather than objective, aspects. However, in alignment with the moderated constructivist perspective, this thesis also considers objective aspects (Darby, et al., 2019). Specifically, the thesis seeks to determine the extent to which Saudi sports investments can be considered sportswashing. This entails paying attention to the belief of the media and authors of articles, while also relating to objective aspects that play a key role in the explanation of the possible

existence of sportswashing, such as the ownership structure of PIF. Consequently, it is natural to take the moderated constructivist epistemological perspective of the correspondence theory of truth. That is, although this acknowledgement agrees with strong constructivists, that social phenomena are mediated and never certain, it is believed that it is achievable to obtain knowledge of an external social reality which, ontologically, exists independently of the human mind (Buch-Hansen, 2021; Darby, et al., 2019; Bevir & Rhodes, 2016). Axiologically, this thesis is furthermore informed by the moderated constructivist philosophical position. As such, research can be value neutral and not shaped by beliefs of the researcher(s) which is a strength of the findings and concluding remarks. Moreover, as opposed to strong constructivists, it is not considered the goal of research to deconstruct dominant ways of thinking. Rather, it is to make sense of the social world. More specifically, the goal is not to deconstruct the media's view on Saudi sports investments. Instead, it is to make sense of it.

Research Design

This paper will follow an inductive approach. This is reflected in the research question, “To what extent can Saudi sports investments be considered sportswashing?,” that was developed based on initial observations of Saudi sports investments. The inductive approach is also evident in the structure of the paper where a phenomenon is observed (the Saudi sports investments), further data is collected and then an analysis is conducted to discover patterns that can explain the phenomenon in order to answer the research question. Additionally, in line with the inductive approach (Bryman, 2016), it is important to note that this paper is iterative in the sense that it grew increasingly narrower and more refined as the different sections of the paper were written and re-written. The main reason for choosing the inductive method is the current scarcity of literature on Saudi sports investments, and sportswashing in general, making the inductive approach, where observations come before theory, the better fit to add to the understanding of sports investments conducted by Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this paper can be considered an idiographic case study in that it seeks to elucidate the unique features of a single case (Bryman, 2016), namely the unique features of the Saudi sports investments, as well as the unique opportunities and incentives for sportswashing that Saudi Arabia exhibits. The reason for choosing a case study approach is to gain in-depth knowledge of the complex case of Saudi sports investments

This paper will utilize an explanatory sequential method in which an initial phase of quantitative analysis is followed by a qualitative analysis that allows for further interpretation and understanding

of the quantitative information achieved in the first phase (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Specifically, this paper will use content analysis quantitatively to identify general patterns within the sample of media (based on the selection criteria described below) regarding the role of Saudi sports investments. Next, qualitative content analysis on the achieved quantitative information will be used to provide a more interpretive analysis of the data and elaborate on the patterns of the quantitative information to further develop the understanding of the role of Saudi sports investments. As the literature on sportswashing and the role of Saudi sports investments are limited, the use of the sequential explanatory approach allows the paper to provide both a quantitative analysis that can indicate general tendencies and a valuable qualitative analysis that would not have been feasible without the initial quantitative phase. Likewise, the quantitative phase justifies the selection of cases for further elaboration and limits the risk of biased selection of cases. The findings from the content analysis will also be compared to existing literature on the subject and will be put in the context of theory.

Content analysis

Departing from Bryman's contribution to content analysis, this thesis will conduct a quantitative and qualitative content analysis based on articles about sports investment conducted by the Saudi Arabian regime. Content analysis has no one specific definition. However, perhaps, the most wellknown one is put forth by Berelson (1952) who said: "*Content analysis is a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.*" (Bryman, 2016). Neither contrastingly nor identically, Holsti (1969) has put forth another wellknown definition of content analysis that goes as follows: "*Content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages.*" (Bryman, 2016). Although the two scholars do not agree entirely on the definition of content analysis, their definitions converge. Most notably, on the subject of objectivity and being systematic. The former refers to the clear specification of observation schedules and rules prior to the assignment of raw material (such as stories in the media) to categories (Bryman, 2016). Here, objectivity occurs since it resides in the existence of transparency in the procedures for assigning raw material to categories. In the coding schedule developed below, objectivity is strengthened through the assignment of codes to mutually exhaustive categories and dimensions. Consequently, the effect of personal bias of the analyst is minimized, as the analyst is simply applying the rules in question (Bryman, 2016), being the coding manual. With respect to being systematic, the personal bias of the researcher is once again suppressed.

This follows that being systematic refers to applying the rules in a consistent manner. The combination of the qualities of objectivity and being systematic provides the opportunity for anyone to apply the same rules, and hence, arrive at a similar conclusion (Bryman, 2016).

It is deemed exceedingly difficult to gain access to focal individuals and/or focus groups in Saudi Arabia that have valuable insights in the strategic development of the Saudi economy or have insights into the reasons behind conducting sports investments. Thus, gathering valuable information about the Saudi sports investments is not easy. Therefore, this paper conducts a content analysis that allows information to be gathered about large social groups that represent the general public sentiment and opinions. In this sense, social groups are Western stakeholders where information on their sentiment is gathered through media. The media shapes public opinion (Hopkins et al., 2017), underscoring the relevance of using content analysis on media articles. Content analysis pertains further advantages that justify the use of it. In terms of media sampling, the researchers have no influence over the textual contents of the articles analyzed. Thus, content analysis with regards to news articles have no reactive effect and lends itself to being unobtrusive in nature (Bryman, 2016) allowing the research to be more credible in its findings. The final advantage that Bryman (2016) notes with regards to content analysis is its ability to conduct longitudinal studies. This is however less relevant for this study of Saudi Arabia because of the recency of the Saudi sports investments. Coupled with the advantage of replicability, it is, however, interesting for future research as it allows research to be conducted on how media sentiment towards Saudi sports investments have changed over time.

Applying Content Analysis

The approach to the analysis comes in light of similar research done on sportswashing using different case studies. Content analysis was conducted on the cases of the 2008 Olympic Games (Alfs & Preuss, 2011) in China and the FIFA World Cup in Qatar in 2022 (Galily et al., 2016) where respectively 740 and 272 news articles were assessed using coding schemes to deduce media sentiment towards the hosting of these events. As these two papers are researching similar topics and examine sportswashing, they are deemed as relevant points of inspiration from a methodological standpoint. The two papers argue that sporting mega events were hosted as a method to rebrand their respective countries image (Galily et al., 2016; Alfs & Preuss, 2011). This is in line with this thesis' approach to Saudi sports investments. Through content analysis of media articles, Galily et al. (2016) and Alfs & Preuss (2011) attempted to gain a systematic view of public sentiment towards these events,

allowing them to make claims about whether the investments were successful in terms of improving the country's image. In the Qatari study, media sampling was conducted by a keyword search on the news networks in the time frame 20/08-2013 to 31/12-2014 (Alfs & Preuss, 2011). Thereafter, the articles that were found using the first key word search were filtered with regards to their relevance to sporting affairs. The China study utilized a similar data collection method using keyword search (Galily et al., 2016). In terms of data collection and use of content analysis, as will be described in the proceeding sections, this thesis' approach to sampling was likewise a key word search. The two papers to which are being referred used manual coding whereas Nvivo as a software tool for textual analysis is used in this methodology. Nvivo will aid the quantitative and qualitative part of the analysis by systematically organizing the results.

Another reason for using content analysis in this study is linked to its advantages in terms of replicability. This was noted by Alf and Preuss (2011) when discussing future research prospects in light of their study on China, where they note that similar research can be done on different sporting cases such as the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa and 2016 in Brazil. This paper can be considered a replicated study of previous sportswashing research and in order to contribute and extend findings from previous literature, it is deemed appropriate to consider what has previously been done. As the framework for testing similar cases has been conducted before, utilizing the replicable nature of content analysis is fitting. The study's replicability is a product of its transparency concerning clearly defined coding schemes and media sampling methods, allowing content analysis to be an objective method for analysis (Bryman, 2016).

Sampling

For the content analysis, this paper utilizes purposive sampling to sample articles from media outlets that were among the 20 largest in the world based on monthly online readers (Majid, 2022)⁵, as these were deemed to have most influence and to possess the highest quality of articles. Initially, the sampling was contained to the western media of this list, as the West was deemed to be the

stakeholders important to the analysis of the Saudi sports investments as the investments have, to a large extent, been conducted on Western sporting bodies , as exemplified by the NUFC acquisition,

⁵ Based on numbers from March 2022.

Formula 1 and the hosting of a heavyweight championship boxing fight. This decision, this thesis acknowledges, will most likely entail an unconscious western biased view in the sample. However, emphasis is placed on western media (including their bias) because their power as an influencer on the Western perception of Saudi Arabia makes them instrumental in understanding the impact of Saudi sports investments. Moreover, as the paper uses a contingent sampling strategy, the sampling criteria, that was initially exclusive to articles from western media on the top 20 list of largest global media outlets, were updated to also include non-western articles based on the updated sampling criteria that articles from any media outlet on the list could be sampled if the media outlet was deemed to have a western or global audience.⁶ Subsequently, the criteria for choosing which codes to further elucidate in the qualitative section was based on the insights from the results of the quantitative analysis.

The process of finding articles was done through a keyword search on the search engine tool of the respective news websites in focus. This process was similar to Galily et al, (2016) using the keyword “Qatar” on Sky, CNN and ITV news websites to filter for articles relevant for their Qatar case study. Following the initial search, they tailored their findings of 476 articles down to 272 that dealt with sport (Galily et al, 2016). This thesis used the following keyword search: “Saudi Arabia” AND “Sport”, directly from the media outlets’ search tool. By placing “Sport” and “Saudi Arabia” in quotation marks we directly filter for articles containing a direct match to both. As recommended by Barbera et al (2021), keyword searches were used, rather than predefined categorical searches provided by the news sites. This thesis could not use categorical searches as it is not interested solely on sports articles or solely on articles about Saudi Arabia but rather in articles related to the combination of the two. Further filtering was done in the sampling by setting the time frame of 01/01/2019 to 10/05/2022 as a search criteria. This time frame was selected to account for the investments that Saudi Arabia have already undertaken in line with the Saudi Vision 2030, to set an arbitrary limit on the number of articles found and incorporate a degree of recency in our media sampling. The key word searches were conducted on NY Times, The Guardian, Reuters, Forbes, CNBC, The Telegraph, Al Jazeera and Fox News to gather a holistic view and gather information from a wide range of authors and geographical locations, centered around the west. From the 20

⁶ Other sampling criteria included the need for articles to be in English for our ability to understand them and for our ability to use them in our software (Nvivo).

largest media outlets these sources we chosen based on article accessibility and quality of search tools. Using the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), articles were further reviewed and filtered. Following the initial identification stage using keyword searches any duplicate articles in the sample were removed. Thereafter, screening was conducted on the articles for accessibility. Once accessible articles were filtered for screening for eligibility was necessitated. Herein, it is understood that eligible articles were articles that were relevant for our research. Some of the identified, accessible articles were ones that used the word “sport” out of context. One example of this is an article from the New York Times concerned with Netflix censorship in Saudi Arabia where the word sport was used as a verb and out of context with regards to our research topic. Another example is a New York Times piece that wrote about the horse Medina Spirit whose owner is from Saudi Arabia. Both articles were deemed ineligible for coding. Following the filtering process of the articles, the sampling procedure yielded 78 articles eligible for coding.

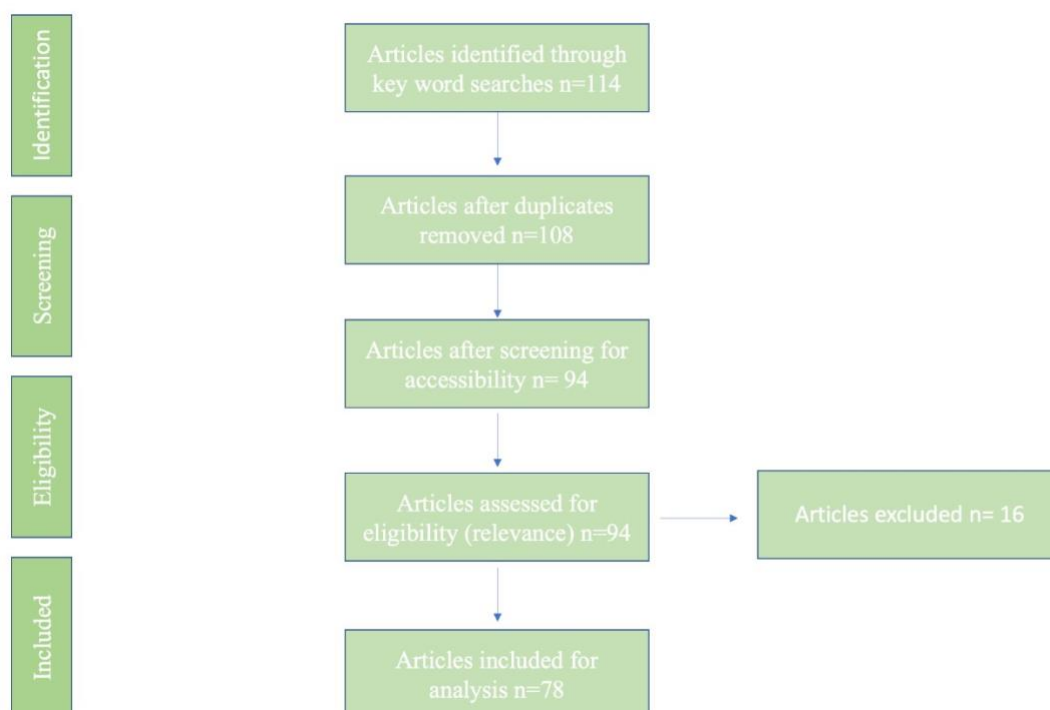


Figure 2. PRISMA Guidelines as presented in Moher et al. (2009), specified for the sampling of this thesis. Source: (Authors, 2022)

Coding

The keyword search provided the articles for the textual analysis allowing the use of Nvivo to aid the creation of codes. This was done by scraping the text in the articles to find the most prevalent words

in terms of frequency of use. This was of particular interest to the thesis as the frequency of words can reveal bias towards the sensationalizing of a particular topic (Bryman, 2016). This is relevant for this research as interest lies in the medias attitude towards Saudi sports investments as sentiment can reveal the incentives behind sportswashing. Semantic meaning can be inferred merely down to the frequency of the use of particular words such as negative emotive words. It was necessary to remove filler words such as “and”, “the”, “then” and other conjunction words to keep the codes relevant for research purposes. Furthermore, naturally as a result of our keyword search, the words “Saudi”, “Arabia” and “Sport” were also amongst the most frequent and these were removed as well as they were deemed irrelevant to the coding scheme. Using Nvivo, a word frequency test yielded a table of a total of 35 words that could be used in establishing coding manual.⁷ The PRISMA Guidelines were extended from the sampling method in order to filter for the relevancy of words to be used in the coding scheme. As it was not possible to account for all possible filler words, certain words were removed if they again were deemed irrelevant to the coding scheme.

Once the most frequent words in the articles were identified, they were used to derive a coding scheme. For one, accounting for word frequency is a way to familiarize with the articles and provide an overview over possible dimensions by which the derivation of categories can occur. Words in this sense are used as codes to which negative, neutral or positive semantic meaning can be attributed to. The dimensions that were come up with were Reputation, Sentiment, Saudi Sports Investments and Sportswashing Allegations. Within these dimensions, there were categories. Categories for the reputation dimension, for example, were Human Rights, Partnerships, Piracy, Violence and Progressive Change. These categories were realized based off the creation of word clouds where the general cluster trends within the articles could be determined, and these were the most prevalent. The breakdown of dimensions and categories can be seen below.

Dimensions

⁷ See full list in appendix.

Categories	Reputation		Sentiment	Sport Investment	Sportswashing Allegations
	Human Rights	Women's Rights	Negative	Boxing	
		Kashoggi		F1	
	Piracy		Neutral	Newcastle United FC	
	Yemen Crisis				
	Partnerships		Positive	Golf	
	Progressive Change				

Figure 3. An overview of the coding frame used for the content analysis. Source: (Authors, 2022)

The categories are used to systematically breakdown the contents of the analyzed articles. This follows the procedure used in Galily et al. 2016 that used similar categorical variables in their study on sportswashing in Qatar. The use of a coding scheme enhances the replicability and credibility of the analysis. The coders were in agreement with regards to the meaning of each category and what text could be attributed to a code that fits into a category. Clearly identifying the coding scheme and how it was derived enables other researchers to extend the findings in a similar field of research.

The piracy category relates to anything regarding the BeautQ scandal, and Saudi Arabia's publishing of illegal streaming services for international football matches. The Yemen Crisis category incorporates any reference to war, bombings, terrorism or any other forms of violence related to the Saudi conflict with Yemen. Partnerships regards references to alliances between Saudi Arabia or its royal family with other countries or organizations. Progressive change regards current socio-cultural reform happening in Saudi Arabia. All of these categories are subsets of the dimension Reputation meaning that codes in any form to the above-mentioned category must relate to the Saudi reputation in the West. Codes falling into any respective category were then coded in the sentiment category whether they portray negative, neutral or positive sentiment. Positive sentiment was coded if the context was supportive or in favor of Saudi Arabia. Neutral sentiment was given to articles and codes that were informative, descriptive or using no emotive words. Negative sentiment was given to codes that were critical towards Saudi Arabia. This is considered disposition in content analysis, where coders attach meaning to editorial commentary (Bryman, 2016) and is used similarly in Galily et al.'s (2016) study on Qatar. The coders had to be in unison when discerning meaning from the texts to ensure that two coders attach the same sentiment to the same text.

Creating the coding scheme leads to creating a coding manual. The coding manual is critical to enhance intercoder reliability by forcing researchers to conduct analyses in similar ways. Herein, it is necessary that dimensions are discrete and entirely separate from one another, the categories within each dimension are mutually exclusive and do not overlap, each code should be able to fit each category, and clear instructions for the use of the coding manual is apparent (Bryman, 2016). This intuition behind content analysis was followed in that each code within the text could fall into any of the categories. For example, the code “weaponizing sport to improve international reputation” (Guardian 12) could fall under a number of categories but only one within each dimension: negative in terms of the dimension sentiment and it could fall under the dimension sportswashing allegations.

Furthermore, it is critical to ensure coding conformity so that coders are in agreement with the meaning attached to the codes, I.e., the category into which they fit. To account for intercoder reliability, the authors underwent a test to ensure compliance with the coding manual. Three articles were coded and the extent to which codes were placed into the same dimensions and categories was tested. The reliability test showed a high degree of agreeableness amongst the coders where two coders were in complete agreement across the three articles and one coder disagreed on the categorization of two codes. The intercoder reliability test was not only used a method of good practice in qualitative analysis (Joffe & O’Connor, 2020) but it is deemed that the fact that the coders agreed increases the studies trustworthiness and external reliability (Bryman, 2016).

Following the acceptable results of the internal reliability test, it was possible to conduct the coding. Using the coding scheme and the manual, the three coders coded a third of the articles each and combined their findings. During this process some categories were amended that were originally planned to code for, however if deemed that they were of little relevance, or simply nothing was coded in the category, they were deleted. Furthermore, the category of progressive change was added during the process of coding as the category was not a part of the preliminary coding scheme. Codes that fall under progressive change can be widespread and therefore specific words related to progressive change did not directly appear in the word frequency test. When systematically going through the articles, general tendencies in describing progressive change were realized and the category was added to incorporate these codes in the analysis.

Analysis

The analysis will follow the sportswashing framework, as presented in figure 1 and the theory section. Firstly, Saudi Arabia's incentive to sportswash is established by presenting the results of the content analysis. Secondly, through a state-capitalism lens the thesis will look at the opportunities by which Saudi Arabia can conduct sportswashing. Next, the main arguments for why the Saudi sports investments can be considered sportswashing will be presented. Lastly, to further strengthen the argument that the Saudi sports investment can be considered sportswashing, a section analyzing the financial aspects of the Saudi sports investments will be provided.

Saudi Arabia's reputation: an incentive to sportswash

In this part of the analysis will analyze Saudi Arabia's reputation and the effect its image has on incentives to sportswash will be analyzed. The centrality of the West is evident from the Saudi sports investments conducted since the introduction of the Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016. It is apparent that the sports investments conducted are closely tied to Western culture in that the events and clubs that constitute the Saudi sports investments are largely based in, or run by, European or North American organizations. For example, the most high-profile Saudi sports investments, acquiring NUFC, hosting Formula 1, and creating a breakaway Golf League from the PGA Tour all have stakeholders that are primarily centered in Europe and North America. This provides reasons to analyze Europe and North America as the main targets for potential Saudi sportswashing. Further adding to this argument is that it is especially in the West that Saudi Arabia's reputation, defined as "(...) the presence or absence of international legitimacy accrued to a certain nation" (Fullerton & Kendrick, 2014), is tainted. For example, a 2022 Gallup survey found that 67% of Americans had an overwhelmingly negative view of Saudi Arabia, making the Kingdom even less popular than China (Gallup, 2022).

Media sentiment, which is analyzed in the content analysis, is important because of its relationship with public opinion. Media sentiment is variously shaping, reflecting and reinforcing public opinion (Hopkins et al., 2017), meaning that it is also shaping Saudi Arabia's reputation in the West. Moreover, the sportswashing concept and the determination of whether something can be considered an act of sportswashing is based on social context and the sentiment towards the act. Therefore, the media, through its role as the primary shaper of public opinion, can be considered the most direct

indicator of whether an act can be considered sportswashing, and therefore also the most fitting operationalization to measure sportswashing. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, if it is to be successful in achieving the goals of the Saudi Vision 2030, needs to attempt to reverse this trend of negative reputation, as it can jeopardize the plan to diversify and develop its economy. The effective implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030 is largely dependent on tourism and international partnerships (Grand & Wolff, 2020) that, in turn, is dependent on Saudi Arabia's reputation. Increasing tourism into the country and building a bigger tourism industry is one of the key strategic goals of the Saudi Vision 2030 (Ibid.). However, until 2019, when Saudi Arabia introduced new visa rules, the Kingdom only allowed citizens from four countries to visit without a visa, thus, it was one of the most restrictive countries, only exceeded by countries like Libya and North Korea (Forbes 4, appendix 1). As tourism can further improve a country's image through people's tourism experiences (Anholt, 2011), this restrictive visa policy severely limited the number of incoming tourists, meaning that the Saudi reputation could not fully benefit from the potential positive experiences of additional tourists.

Furthermore, the number of tourists in Saudi Arabia has been steadily decreasing since 2014 where the country had more than 18 million visitors compared to 2019 where the country had just over 15 million visitors (UN WTO, 2022). As country reputation and tourism is closely linked (Tapachai & Waryszak, 2000) (Yang et al., 2008), this decrease in tourism is, based on the findings from the analysis of media sentiment, likely to originate from the deterioration of the Saudi international reputation. Saudi Arabia's international image has been exacerbated after the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen in 2015 and the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 that has been attributed to Saudi Arabia (Guardian 14, appendix 1). This same tendency is likely to be the main cause that foreign direct investments have not improved in the manner that was envisioned in the Saudi Vision 2030 (Grand & Wolf, 2020). Hence, Saudi Arabia has great incentive to improve their international reputation.

Improving media sentiment can be an efficient tool for improving international reputation (Eccles et al., 2007). There are, however, two different strategies that Saudi Arabia can follow. The first strategy is to assess what Eccles et al. (2007) calls the reputation-reality gap, meaning Saudi Arabia must understand how the realities of the Saudi society affects its international reputation and it must make the necessary improvements to amend it. This strategy could, for example, include improving women's rights to near Western standards, to close the reputation-reality gap, thereby improving

media sentiment, and ultimately improving Saudi Arabia's reputation in the West. However, as outlined in the following section, Saudi Arabia show no sign of neglecting authoritarian means to approach Western values (and close the reputation-reality gap). Therefore, the country has great incentive to make use of the alternative strategy presented by Eccles et al. (2007), that includes no societal changes but rather attempts to drown out the negative media sentiment with positive stories, such as stories about successful sports clubs or the successful hosting of sporting events – i.e., sportswashing. Consequently, this paper argues, Saudi Arabia, based on its great incentive to improve its reputation, has chosen the sportswashing strategy.

It is therefore appropriate to view Saudi sports investments through a sportswashing lens as a result of their traditionally oppressive socio-political climate (Qureshi, 2014) backboned by Wahhabism, the prevailing ultra conservative form of Islam (Lacroix, 2019). This has fostered the need for economic, political and socio-cultural reform to change the nature of women's rights, encourage the promotion of enterprise and address looming health crises (Chadwick & Widdop, 2022). Under the leadership of the crown prince Mohammad Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has been making attempts to achieve this. A cornerstone of the Saudi Vision 2030 is becoming more attractive to Western partners in which strides were made by easing the restrictions on women's rights such as allowing them to drive in 2017 (Lacroix, 2019). This progress effectively combats the religious establishment entrenched in the Saudi society. However, the shifting power dynamics in Saudi Arabia has led some to contend that the crown prince is conducting authoritarian power grabs, worsening the socio-political climate and causing the assassination of critics such as Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 (Lacroix, 2019). In order to become more attractive to the West, more progressive change is necessary. This objective has been pushed forward at unprecedented speeds (Eum, 2019) although the sentiment in Western media shows that negative perceptions towards Saudi Arabia still persist.

Measuring the sentiment in the coded articles, in this context, is important as it can be an indicator of Saudi Arabia's reputation and thus of its incentives to sportswash. The articles analyzed showed clear trends in terms of sentiment towards Saudi Arabia. The amount of negative sentiment is remarkable as the coded articles are mainly about sports which is usually informative in nature, thus strongly indicating that Saudi Arabia's international reputation is poor. Figure 4 shows the sentiment across all codes across the 3-point sentiment scale. Sentiment was referenced a total of 703 times through the analyzed articles wherein negative made up the bulk of the codes. 508 were coded under negative sentiment, 136 were neutral and only 59 were positive.

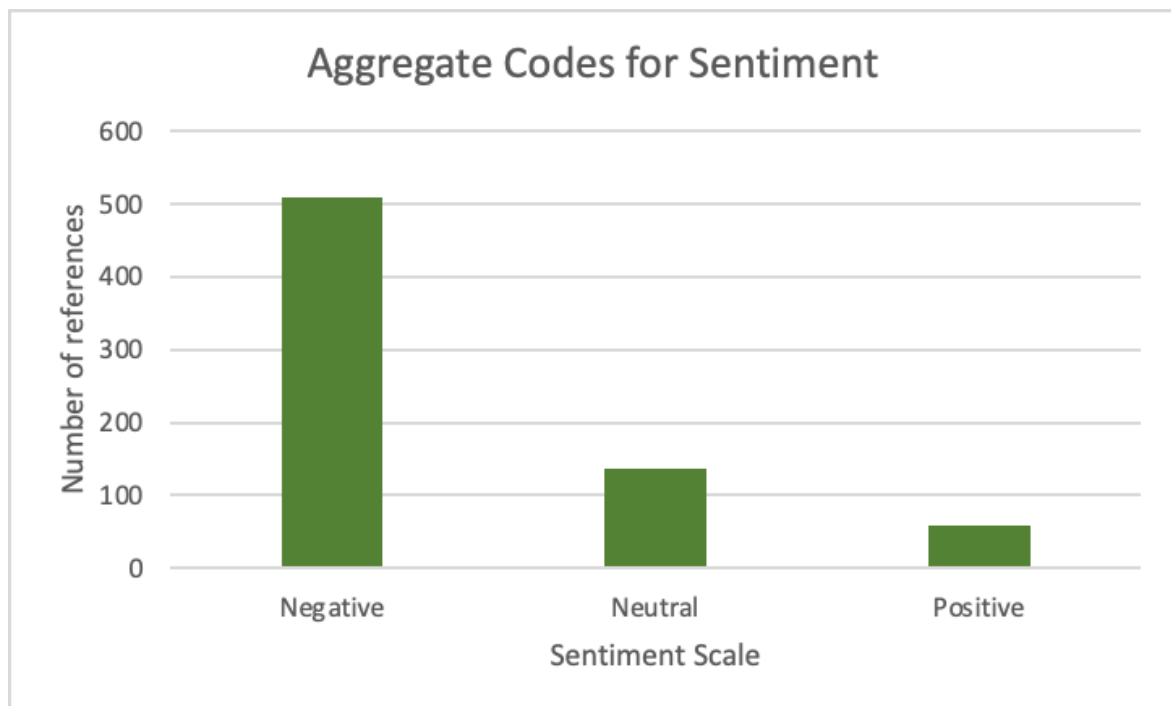


Figure 4. Bar graph showing the distribution of sentiment references (authors, 2022)

Codes in themselves were predominantly negative in sentiment but this is extended when looking at general sentiment of the articles. If the majority of codes in one article was either positive, neutral or negative the article would be coded as such. Herein, we see that out of the 78 coded articles, 43 were, to a large extent, negative towards Saudi Arabia. 4 articles were predominantly positive and 31 were primarily neutral. Positive sentiment was further investigated, finding that they placed emphasis on the importance of partnerships and progressive change. One article mentioned that the relationship between the UK and Saudi Arabia is “very important” (Guardian 1) and another notes the “ambitious reforms” taking place in Saudi Arabia (Guardian 5). The general sentiment trend portrays that western media are in general more critical than supportive towards Saudi Arabia’s sports investments. Interestingly, Al Jazeera articles were extremely negative and focuses almost solely on the BeoutQ-piracy scandal where Saudi Arabia stole and broadcasted Qatari-owned broadcasts. Al Jazeera, however, is also state-run by Qatar, the main loser in the piracy case. Furthermore, the media outlet has close ties to the UK (where it rotates its broadcasting between Doha and London), which is home to the Premier League, the other big loser in the piracy case (Al Jazeera 3). This stands in contrast to the portrayal found in the FOX News articles that were all neutral in their sentiment. In order to better understand these findings, one can look at the codes matched to both the dimensions of sportswashing allegations and sports investments. Investments were tied to allegations of sportswashing, either

directly or indirectly, 90 times. Sportswashing allegations were often tied to negative sentiment codes as well, illuminating the major cases tarnishing Saudi Arabia's reputation. Herein, human rights were coded for most often in which the Khashoggi incident and women's rights were often mentioned. Furthermore, allegations were also linked to piracy and violence. Allegations were rarely coded in isolation as the articles often illustrated the specific need for sportswashing by highlighting specific incidents that diminish Saudi

Arabia's reputation in the West. This is made possible by the exhaustive nature of the categories, wherein under each dimension, all possible categories are available to be coded for.

As mentioned, negative sentiment was primarily coded for, in the dimension of reputation under the categories Human Rights, Yemen Crisis and Piracy. Within Human Rights, Khashoggi and women's rights were coded for primarily. Articles often used illustrative and emotive words to describe the incidents cementing their negative sentiment. The Khashoggi incident was described as "brutal" (FOX 2), "grisly" (Forbes 2) and "medieval-typed" (Forbes 3). Women's rights were described as "draconian" (FOX 3) where they had been "flagrantly denied" access to physical education (Guardian 15). Furthermore, articles place stark emphasis on the imprisonment of individuals who had been advocating for women's rights, serving time even after progressive changes had taken place in Saudi Arabia. As mentioned, negative sentiment was often coded in duality with sporting allegations. The "weaponization of sport for political gain" (Guardian 12), "blatant white-washing" (Forbes 2), "help legitimize the country's repressive regime" (Guardian 24) and "show the killers they cannot wash away their crimes" (Reuters 3) are all examples of allegations of sportswashing with clear negative connotations. The emphasis that is being placed on Saudi Arabia's international reputation with regards to their involvement with the war in Yemen, poor human rights record and the piracy scandal, alludes to the increasingly apparent negative sentiment towards Saudi Arabia. The emphasis placed on their poor reputation is a clear indicator that Saudi Arabia's goal of becoming attractive to the west (Chadwick, 2022) is still far from being realized.

When looking at the articles putting Saudi Arabia and their sports investments in a positive light, emphasis is placed on the importance of maintaining good international relations with the Gulf state. Herein, USA (FOX 3) and the United Kingdom (Guardian 1) are mentioned as important partners. Additionally, the positive codes place emphasis on Saudi Arabia as being a place of "economic opportunity" (CNBC 5) that is "vibrant, open and welcoming" (Guardian 10). Codes with positive sentiment are only to be found across 18 out of the 78 articles, however. This is suggestive of an

underwhelming amount of support towards Saudi Arabia in the analyzed articles. Had the majority of articles portrayed Saudi Arabia positively, it would have been apparent in the codes and referencing under the reputation dimension. In fact, Partnerships was the least coded for category under the reputation dimension, where it was referenced 18 times across 12 articles. This is a critical difference compared to the category human rights that was coded 161 times across 49 articles. The tendency for articles to display such a strong negativity bias towards Saudi Arabia is interesting as it also conceivably goes to indicate that very few things are being done in Saudi Arabia to rectify their image.

Ultimately, all sports investments analyzed in this thesis that are conducted by PIF, and thus Saudi Arabia, have shown to have considerably more negative than positive sentiment in media coverage. Out of the 24 coding references related to golf investments conducted by PIF, 18 were coded to have a negative sentiment towards the Kingdom, and 11 were neutral. Hence, there were no codes related to golf investments with a positive sentiment towards the kingdom. Regarding Formula 1 investments, 79 coding references were made in total. Out of those, 60 were coded to have negative sentiment, 17 neutrals and 2 positives. The NUFC acquisition was referred to 119 times with negative sentiment coded for 72 times, 40 with neutral and 7 times with positive sentiment. Consequently, regardless of the sports investment, our findings suggest that the media coverage was considerably negative towards the kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Again, this suggests the negative sentiment surrounding the mentioning of sports investments is significant as it is an indicator for the incentives behind conducting sports investments for a sportswashing purpose.

Following the sportswashing framework, the root causes of Saudi Arabia's negative reputation, which is the incentive for the Saudi sportswashing, can be established. As indicated by the content analysis, the country's lack of human rights is the main cause for Saudi Arabia's negative international reputation. In 2022, Saudi Arabia was deemed among 'the worst of the worst' by Freedom House (2022) that, when measuring the country's civil rights and political rights, found that only Syria, North Korea, South Sudan, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, and the Central African Republic were deemed worse than Saudi Arabia. This classification is based on a range of human rights issues in Saudi Arabia that includes the lack of democratic elections, and especially the discrimination against women and minorities (Repucci & Slipowits, 2022). Furthermore, thousands of peaceful human rights activists have been jailed or put on trial by the Saudi government according to the prevailing zero tolerance of dissent, that was also evident when the Saudi journalist Khashoggi was killed in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 (HRW, 2022).

Additionally, similarly indicated by the results of the content analysis, the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia, especially the Yemen crisis, also contributed to Saudi Arabia's poor international reputation. The kingdom has since 2015 backed the ousted government of Yemen, that much like itself, is an authoritarian regime with little attention to human rights, to ensure that the country cannot be used as a satellite by Iran. The Saudi-led coalition has been using airstrikes and hunger as weapons in Yemen and has killed and wounded thousands of civilians as well as been accused of various war crimes (HRW, 2022). This decision to engage in the war has been criticized internationally, partly because of the nature of the regime that Saudi Arabia is supporting and the nature of its warfare, but mainly because the war in Yemen has led to what the UN calls "the greatest humanitarian crisis in the world" (UN, 2021).

The lack of human rights in Saudi Arabia is damaging to the country's reputation because it is in stark contrast to the Western countries' perception of the importance of human rights. Likewise, the Saudi Arabian-led military campaign in Yemen damages the country's image as it is perceived as illegitimate by the West. It is precisely this misalignment of the political values and foreign policy between Saudi Arabia and the West that is the root cause of its poor reputation in the West. As earlier mentioned, this is problematic for Saudi Arabia as it is in the West that the country seeks to improve its image in order to attract Western partners and tourism. The gap between Saudi Arabia's desired reputation and the country's actual reputation could be effectively closed by societal improvements (Eccles et al., 2007). Instead, Saudi Arabia attempts to drown out the lack of societal improvements with sports investments, i.e., Saudi Arabia has chosen to conduct sportswashing to cover up its lack of human rights and its illegitimate foreign policy. This has led Saudi Arabia to spend billions on sports investments according to what Human Rights Watch calls "a deliberate strategy to deflect from the country's image as a pervasive human rights violator" (Al Jazeera 1) in an attempt to sportswash their reputation instead of resolving these issues. This is one of the reasons why Saudi sports investments can, to a large extent, be considered sportswashing.

State capitalism: Saudi Arabia's sportswashing opportunities

Having established Saudi Arabia's incentive to sportswash, we now consider the opportunities and tools by which they do so. In order for any nation to conduct sportswashing, institutional framework(s) must allow for sportswashing to occur. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the existence of state capitalism does exactly that. The rationale behind this statement is that sportswashing occurs

when sportswashers seek to improve their international image through investing in sports. Thus, if the state was not a great stakeholder of PIF, and hence not associated with the fund, any activity pursued by PIF - including sports investments - would not directly influence the image of the kingdom. Consequently, the existence of state capitalism in Saudi Arabia provides the opportunity for the kingdom to conduct sportswashing.

Moving forward, Musacchio et al. (2015) argue for the existence of four varieties of state capitalism, wholly owned SOEs, the state as a majority investor, the state as a minority investor, and the state as a strategic sponsor of certain industries (Musacchio et al., 2015). In this analysis section, the argument that Saudi sports investments have been enabled by two kinds of state capitalism is made, wholly owned SOEs and the state as a majority investor.

With regards to the presence of wholly owned SOEs, the Saudi acquisition of NUFC is of great relevance. The findings show this as in total 258 references were coded to sports investments conducted by PIF. Out of those, 119 were references to Newcastle United FC followed by Formula 1 with 79 references. This shows the particular relevance of the PIF acquisition of NUFC. Interestingly, the bid to invest in NUFC would only be accepted by the Premier League if they could be assured that the club would not be linked to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, as PIF was the fund purchasing the club, PIF had to make a legally binding assurance that they were not a part of the Saudi State. Apparently, that was enough to persuade the Premier League that PIF is independent from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and as such, the deal went through. Several of the 78 articles which were coded ridiculed this in that they retained the focus that PIF and the regime were closely linked. The following quote from NYT 1 portrays exactly that: “Newcastle is now the richest club in soccer, backed by the unimaginable wealth of the Public Investment Fund, the investment vehicle of Saudi Arabia but absolutely not — and apologies if this makes no sense — in any way linked to the Saudi state, even though Mohammed bin Salman, the country’s crown prince and de facto ruler, is the chairman of the P.I.F., and even though it describes itself as a “sovereign” wealth fund, which rather gives away where its money comes from.” (NYT 1).

By presenting that PIF and the Saudi regime are crucially interlinked, in the case of the acquisition of NUFC, the first variety of state capitalism, wholly owned SOEs, is present. The reason is that PIF, as mentioned, is the national wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, as well as its chairman is the crown prince of the kingdom. Consequently, whenever PIF pursues any investment, it is backed by the state, and whenever the state pursues any political objective, such as attempting to attract western partners by

improving its reputation through investing in sports, it is financially backed by PIF. This exceedingly critical role of the state provides incentives for enterprises, such as PIF, to engage in sportswashing. The rationale behind this statement is that in a capitalistic market economy, whether it is a liberal or coordinated one, enterprises act accordingly to their dynamic capabilities with the purpose of developing, producing, and distributing goods and services profitably (Teece & Pisano, 1998; Hall & Soskice, 2001). Therefore, as sportswashing activities are not necessarily financially profitable, rather, they are vehicles for obtaining soft power, enterprises in economies practicing state capitalism are, *ceteris paribus*, relatively more incentivized to engage in sportswashing compared to those in capitalistic market economies.

A reason for the large degree of negative sentiment determined by the content analysis can be found in the theoretical development of state capitalism by Musacchio et al. (2015). They argue for the existence of different varieties of state capitalism that have come to exist because of the inefficiency of state capitalism when the role of the state is too directly controlling the economy (Musacchio et al., 2015). The rationale behind this statement is found in the problems of state capitalism related to managerial agency, the social view, and the political view, as accounted for in the theory section (Musacchio et al., 2015). In terms of Saudi sports investments, those problems are indeed relevant. Sports investments conducted by PIF are considered to fall under the category of wholly owned SOE-activities and the state as a majority investor – the two varieties of state capitalism in which the role of the state is most prevalent. It has already been portrayed how Saudi Arabia engages in wholly owned SOE-activities in terms of the kingdom's sports investments. With regards to the state as a majority investor being present in Saudi Arabia, the national oil company Saudi Aramco that the Saudi state owns majority stake of, but still has private shareholders outside of the Saud family, is very critical. In terms of sports investments, not only PIF, but also Saudi Aramco is exceedingly important. It might very well be PIF that finances the Saudi sports investments, but the fund is financially supported by Saudi Aramco. For instance, in 2020, the Saud family transferred US\$80 billion from Aramco to PIF (Othman, 2022). Hence, the appearance of the-state-as-a-majority-investor type of state capitalism. By carrying out the sports investments, the institutional dynamic between the state, PIF and Aramco provides the tools by which Saudi Arabia can conduct sportswashing.

Given the state ownership of PIF, the investments carried out by PIF are ultimately on behalf of the interests of the state. Consequently, rather than investments with financial returns, investments are carried out with the purpose of extending political power - in this case by improving the international

reputation of the Saudi state. In sum, the dynamic between the state and the entities conducting investments on its behalf constitutes the tools that enable sportswashing.

Sportswashing: Results

The preliminary justification considering Saudi sports investments as sportswashing through arguments surrounding the negative sentiment found in the articles suggests that because of the clear incentives to sportswash, the Saudi sports investments are exactly that. However, looking at the articles more explicitly, we can infer through direct sportswashing allegations the extent to which we can attribute sportswashing as the reality behind Saudi investments. Direct sportswashing allegations were found in half of the analyzed articles (n=39). Amongst the 39 direct sportswashing allegations, 35 articles alleging sportswashing did so with negative sentiment. Particularly with regards to this data, it was critical to read and code the articles manually as a word frequency test for the word “sportswashing” would yield 53 returns when in fact, sportswashing was alluded to 198 times. These references come across as “sport as a vehicle for image-management and PR” (FOX 1), “Saudis like to jump on prestigious international brands to whitewash their image” (Guardian 3), “[F1 as a] spotlight for assisting in legitimizing the activities of the regime” (Guardian 20) and “improve the image of the government through sport” (NYT 9), for example. The extent to which Saudi Arabia is being accused of sportswashing is significant. Following on the discussion of the importance of media sentiment and the media as a key shaper of public opinion, the media's tendency to allege sportswashing is crucial in the same fashion. By framing Saudi Arabia's investment ventures as an attempt at bettering their tarnished public image, underscored by negative sentiment, it becomes transferrable to what readers think. This has wide flung effects on various stakeholder groups in Saudi Arabia and in the West. Firstly, cementing ideas that Saudi Arabia conduct crimes against humanity will affect propensity for Western individuals, organizations and corporations to enter strategic partnerships with them. This will make it increasingly difficult for PIF to, on behalf of the Kingdom, conduct foreign direct investment. Secondly, it will negatively affect tourism, a cornerstone of Saudi Vision 2030. However, this may highlight another reason to invest in sport specifically. The allure and grandiose nature of sport allows what is happening on the surface, the specific event, to take focus away from what is happening behind the scenes. The athletes are, or should be, in focus and not the organizers, but in the case of Saudi Arabia the latter seems to continuously steal the spotlight.

Following the sportswashing framework, turning to examine the Saudi sports investments, it becomes clear that they fall directly into the category of sportswashing tools, further suggesting that the Sports investments can, to a large extent be considered sportswashing. The Saudi sports investments can be broadly put into two categories: the hosting of sporting events and the direct investments into international sports franchises. An example of the latter is Saudi Arabia's acquisition of NUFC in the fall of 2021. Specifically, the acquisition falls into the category of reputational sportswashing as Saudi Arabia is attempting to capitalize on the potential sporting success of NUFC. The intention from Saudi Arabia is that the sporting results of NUFC can help rebrand the country and divert attention away from the misalignment of political values and foreign policy that exists between Saudi Arabia and the West (CNBC 4). In other words, Saudi Arabia intends to utilize the reputational success related to the potential sporting success of NUFC, highlighting their economic prowess, to alter the negative sentiment toward the country and improve its image. Additionally, in link with Saudi Arabia's use of reputational success as a sportswashing tool, the country can use the NUFC acquisition as a platform for cultural sportswashing. This is done by signaling, through the NUFC acquisition, that sports play a similar role in Saudi culture as it does in Western culture. Thus, Saudi Arabia can appear to reduce the gap between its political values and the political values of the West - without implementing any societal improvements that actually reduce the gap - to improve its international reputation.

The case of NUFC was the most referenced to sports investment in the analyzed articles. Among the 78 articles, references totaled 119 making up 45% of the total references to PIF investments in the articles assessed. The purchase was often referenced as "worrying" (FOX 1, Telegraph 6) with direct claims of the purchase being used as a tool to hide and "distract" (Forbes 2, Guardian 12) from the Saudi human rights record. The NUFC purchase is an ambitious project that emulates Qatar's purchase of Paris based football team Paris Saint-Germain (PSG). Similar to the preliminary findings of our analysis, this takeover was also met with critical media perceptions and negative discourse (Garcia & Amara, 2013). The takeover enables Saudi Arabia to have a foreign platform whereby they can market other state-owned companies and Saudi Arabia as a tourist destination (Chadwick, 2018). This model emulates how PSG is running advertisements on behalf of the Qatari state with Qatar Tourism, Qatar Airways, Ooredoo (Telecom company based in Qatar), Aspetar (Doha based Hospital), Qatar National Bank and BeIN Sports (Operated by Qatari Media Group) amongst the clubs' largest sponsors (PSG, 2022). These are the same companies that adorn billboards

around their stadium and advertise during their games. Due to the similar nature by which Qatar purchased PSG and the similar media sentiment surrounding the acquisition we deem that it is appropriate to expect a similar trend for Saudi Arabia and Newcastle. This portrays the potential for Newcastle to be used as a marketing vehicle for Saudi ventures. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia can further improve their relationship with the UK and international image through developing and investing in NUFC in areas off the pitch. This would encourage a positive feedback loop for cementing strategic partnerships. However, in line with the negative outcome of the sportswashing framework in figure 1, the NUFC acquisition has not been able to drown out the negative perceptions that surround Saudi Arabia as highlighted by the media content analysis as of 2022.

Similarly, when looking at the Saudi sports investments that are categorized as the hosting of events, we find that they are also being utilized as sportswashing tools. The, perhaps, most clear example of this, is Saudi Arabia's contract with Formula 1 to annually host a Formula 1 Grand Prix (Al Jazeera 1). This can be categorized as an attempt of reputational sportswashing as Saudi Arabia attempts to change its image by diverting attention away from the misalignment of political values and foreign policy that exists between Saudi Arabia and the west through the positive media coverage that the successful hosting of such a global sports event is likely to entail. Additionally,

Saudi Arabia's hosting of Formula 1 serves as a platform for representational sportswashing. In response to criticism from the media and from Formula 1 stakeholders (including the drivers), both the Saudi organizers and Formula 1, claimed that hosting the grand prix would not serve to legitimize the country's lack of human rights but rather it would provide additional pressure on Saudi Arabia to improve its civil and political rights (Reuters 2). In other words, Saudi Arabia, through the hosting of Formula 1, attempts to change its image by changing the perception of its human rights issues by representing it as though the country is actively working toward progressive changes in human rights - even though close to no improvements have been made in recent years

(Freedom House, 2022). This suggests that Saudi Arabia's hosting of sports events, such as Formula 1, is an example of reputational and representational sportswashing.

The Formula 1 case is one of the major sports investments that has been carried out by Saudi Arabia from a hosting position. Being the second most referenced to sports investment across the 78 analyzed articles, it is clear that the 2021 Grand Prix fills a lot within media related to Saudi Arabia and sports. One can attribute the large coverage to the stature of Formula 1 within international sports. Formula 1 has a major global viewership, with a global audience of 445 million viewers in

2021 (Lange, 2022) thus serving as a considerable platform to showcase Saudi Arabian society to the world. Another reason for the large media coverage is the scandals that happened prior to the Grand Prix where drivers such as Sebastian Vettel and Lewis Hamilton voiced their concerns regarding Saudi Arabia as the host (CNBC 1). Hamilton was encouraged to speak out about human rights abuse in Saudi Arabia in the weeks leading up the race (Guardian 4; Guardian 10) and was seen sporting a rainbow-colored helmet during the race as a show of support for LGBTQ rights in the country (Hamilton, 2021). In this sense, Formula 1 has also served as a platform to showcase and critique the sources of negative sentiment we have seen in the media such as human rights abuse and violence. From the perspective of Saudi Arabia, Formula 1 serves the purpose to not only introduce Saudis to new sports and renowned athletes, but to “showcase landmarks and the welcoming nature of its people” (Guardian 13). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia will attempt to use the hosting of events to showcase, what the Saudis consider, progressive changes happening (NYT 9) especially what is deemed as big changes happening in favor of women in the nation (Guardian 22). This feeds back to the case for the hosting of these events happening for a sportswashing purpose. By hosting events, whichever changes are taking place will be showcased firsthand to a worldwide audience. The above examples of progressive change are indeed positive, although minimal (Freedom House, 2022), but the negative connotations that surround them cannot be neglected. The glamour of sport is consistently being used to distract the audience's attention from reality. Masking progressive change by displaying that a woman can sit beside a man at a sporting event is negligible to the Western audience and therefore does little to divert attention away from the decades of human rights abuses in Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has attempted to become an international golfing destination by lobbying athletes to break away from the decades long traditional PGA Tour and establish a new golf league. Athletes have been lured away from the North American PGA Tour with lucrative deals that drastically increase the already high earnings of the PGA Tour athletes. Throughout the media articles discussing the proposed Saudi backed Golf league, continuous references have been made against Saudi Arabia's poor reputation. Professional golfer, Phil Mickelson was quoted saying that he was aware of the killing of Khashoggi and the execution of people that are homosexual, but still refrains from pulling out of the tournament deeming that the Saudi backed league is a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity” (NYT 10). This is evidence that the deals that are handed out by Saudi Arabia are so attractive that it effectively mitigates their negative reputation and encourages athletes to join their

league. The league is further labelled as the latest “rebel breakaway” subject to the Mohammad Bin Salmans “personal piggy bank” (Telegraph 1). The golfing lobby work is done in part through athletes but also through strategically incorporating board members across critical organizations (Guardian 25). For example, Yasir al-Rumayyan is a board member of PIF, the sovereign wealth fund, chairman of Golf Saudi and Aramco. This constitutes the key organizers and stakeholders for hosting Golf tournaments with limited checks and balances to maintain its integrity. These organizations constitute SOE’s and thus enable them to act for the good of the state allowing core competences through organization, sponsorships and investments to occur with a unified approach. Thus, the Golf case showcases that Saudi Arabia maintains its capacity to leverage capital and mobilize the morality of athletes to partake in sports events hosted by them. With the evident capacity to host and leverage athletes to partake, Saudi Arabia enables itself to showcase its country to mass media and wide audiences.

In a similar fashion, the heavyweight boxing fight between Anthony Joshua and Andy Ruiz Jr dubbed ‘Clash on the Dunes’, is indicative of an attempt from Saudi Arabia to divert attention from its poor international reputation and appear as an international sporting hub. The boxing fight had significant symbolic value for Saudi Arabia as boxing is often associated with the glamor and prestige of venues such as Las Vegas. The attempt to draw these parallels is critical in the hopes of amending its international reputation as being a destination worthy of hosting the biggest boxing match of 2019. Not only does hosting a fight of this magnitude highlight ability alone, but it serves as platform to which they can display their country to boxing fans worldwide and divert attention away from violence and human rights violations. Within our content analysis, half of the references to boxing make a direct reference to sportswashing allegations as well. We can effectively view this as Saudi Arabia leveraging sport to appear more Western and improve its image - i.e., sportswashing -, thus attracting strategic partners and increasing tourism. In a similar vein, this is in line with Preuss & Alfs (2011) findings with regards to China hosting the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The preceding section has illuminated the Newcastle United, Formula 1, golf and boxing cases as examples of Saudi sports investments through the perspective of them being amenable to sportswashing. In essence, these events promote Saudi Arabia’s position within the world of sport as a core investor and host nation. The core rationale behind these investments is to distract viewers away from their international reputation and shine a light on the Saudi capabilities in leveraging the

glamor of sport for symbolic purposes. We argue that it is crucial to view these investments as ways to conduct sportswashing as a result.

Saudi Investments' Immediate Effect on Media Sentiment

Following the framework, this paper has established an incentive for Saudi Arabia to sportswash as well as the sportswashing tools they utilize, so now the immediate results of the Saudi sportswashing can be examined. Due to the recency of the Saudi sports investments and that the effect of attempts to extend soft power takes years to manifest (Nye Jr., 2004), this section will look at the immediate and short-term results of the Saudi sports investments on media sentiment. As illustrated in the framework, the results of sportswashing can be either negative, positive, or neutral based on the reaction of the sportswashing target(s). From the content analysis, it is evident that the results of the Saudi sportswashing is overwhelmingly negative. This is because Saudi Arabia, as a host of sporting events and owner of sports franchises has failed to live up to the societal expectations of the Western stakeholders of those sports investments (Larsen & Willey, 2011). When applying the sportswashing framework, it is clear that the negative reaction of the West stems from the gap between the political values of Saudi Arabia and the political values of the West being so large that the West, as the sportswashing target, reacts negatively to the sportswashing attempts. This ultimately exacerbates the negative perception of Saudi Arabia by putting more spotlight on the gap of political values, namely the difference between Saudi Arabia's perception of the importance of human rights issues and the Western perception of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy as illegitimate. The negative reaction of the West to Saudi Arabia's sportswashing attempts ultimately, at least in the short-term, exacerbates Saudi Arabia's poor international reputation.

Furthermore, according to the analysis, interpretation of our findings, and the theoretical perspective on state capitalism coined by Musacchio et al. (2015), it is no coincidence that Saudi sports investments have not improved the international reputation of the kingdom, since, in terms of sports investments, the kingdom has applied the two varieties of state capitalism in which the role of the state is the greatest. As such, Saudi Arabia has, following the logic of Musacchio et al. (2015), pursued the least effective varieties of state capitalism. This could explain why the findings of the content analysis suggest that the international reputation of Saudi Arabia remains negative, even after trying to sportswash.

The finding that the Saudi sportswashing attempts have, at least not yet, been successful in improving the country's international reputation, measured by media sentiment, is similar to the findings of Alf & Preuss (2011) that showed how China's hosting of the 2008 summer Olympics had minimal effect on its international reputation. Similar to the Saudi case where the sports investments increased attention to the country's human rights issues, as well as the high-profiled Khashoggi-killing and the Yemen crisis, China's hosting of the Olympics led to increased attention to, and criticism of, China's conflict with Tibet as well as the country's human rights issues (Ibid., 2011). Additionally, our findings are also similar to those of Galily et al. (2016) that showed the significant prevalence of negative sentiment in articles related to Qatari sports after the announcement of Qatar hosting the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Lastly, as is also outlined in our analysis of Saudi Arabia, the fact that Qatar utilized sports investments to improve their international reputation rather than make use of on-ground efforts is why the Qatari and Saudi attempts to improve their international reputation was unsuccessful and the reason why it can, to a large extent, be considered sportswashing.

Financial Prospects of Saudi Sports Investments

To further strengthen the argument that Saudi sports investments, to a large extent, can be considered sportswashing, it should be examined whether the Saudi sports investments are conducted for financial purposes. Therefore, in the following last part of the analysis, the financial aspects of the Saudi sports investments and whether they can turn out to be profitable will be explored. First, the profitability of Saudi Arabia's acquisition of NUFC will be analyzed. Additionally, the Saudi sports investments will be compared to similar cases such as the Abu Dhabi acquisition of Manchester City Football Club (MCFC) and the Qatar backed purchase of PSG. The reason for comparing is that the Saudi acquisition of NUFC is nascent. Hence, it is too soon to measure the profitability of the investment. Second, in order to analyze the possibility of making money from hosting the formula 1 by considering revenues and costs associated with hosting such an event. Third, the economic aspects of the Saudi investments into national sports infrastructure are analyzed.

NUFC recorded a pre-tax loss of €193 million in the 2018/19 season and a pre-tax loss of more than €586 million the year after⁸ (Brown, 2022). Moreover, since 1992 the Premier League clubs have

⁸ The large increase in the pre-tax loss was due to the decreased revenues associated with Covid-restrictions in the UK.

only recorded a net positive annual result four times collectively. It is specifically the middle and lower tier teams, such as NUFC, that fail to turn a profit (Ibid., 2022). This indicates that Saudi Arabia's acquisition of NUFC is not likely to be a profitable investment in the short to mid-term. Additionally, to determine whether the Saudi takeover of NUFC can turn out to be a financially sound investment, the acquisition will be compared to the Abu Dhabi takeover of MCFC. In the

2020/2021 season, the club earned €644.9 million in revenue as the world's highest revenue-earning football club (Lange, 2022; Westwood, 2022). This meant that, since the Abu Dhabi takeover of the club, MCFC has increased its revenue by a remarkable €540,9 million (Lange, 2022). However, the club has only made a profit in three seasons since the takeover 14 years ago. In the 2014/15 season, it earned a profit of €4.71 million, and a profit of €3.53 million in the 2015/16 season while making a profit of €2.82 million in 2020/2021 (University of Liverpool, 2019). Isolated, these figures do not seem to indicate that the MCFC acquisition was a poor financial investment. However, the operating losses of the football club since the takeover have been a lot higher than the few, rather modest, operating profits. For instance, in the 2010/2011 season alone, MCFC had an operating loss of €188 million (University of Liverpool, 2019). Most of the high costs have come from player signings and players' salaries. E.g., since the takeover in the summer of 2008, MCFC's total net transfer spending (€1,980 million) is much higher than any other club in the world (Richter, 2022). Thus, the Abu Dhabi United Group, who owns the holding company that owns MCFC, have far from made a total profit out of their investment in MCFC. A similarly aggressive transfer philosophy is likely to be followed by PIF's acquisition of Newcastle, given their ambitious plans to return the club to its former glory (Arab News 2).

In a similar fashion to the Saudi acquisition of NUFC and the Abu Dhabi takeover of MCFC, the football club PSG was acquired by Qatari Sports Investments (QSI) in 2011. It was only five years after the acquisition, in the 2014/15 season, that the club earned a profit (€11 million) (PSG Group Limited Annual Report, 2015). After that season, however, the club has never earned a profit.

Contrastingly, it has suffered significant operating losses. Those include an operating loss of €124 million in the 2019/20 season and of €224 million in the 2020/21 season (PSG Group Limited, 2021). Another relevant point to make here is that the most significant revenue streams for professional football clubs are those of commercial revenue streams that include sponsorships, merchandising and other commercial operations (Richter, 2022). This is indeed relevant since it is the owners of both

MCFC and PSG that have secured those sponsorship deals using the brand of other large corporations which they own. For example, MCFC is significantly sponsored by Etihad Airways, an Abu Dhabi airline, and Etisalat, an Abu Dhabi telecommunication company. Similarly, Qatar Airways, Qatar National Bank, Qatar Tourism and other Qatari SOEs are the main sponsors of PSG. Therefore, much of the revenue earned by those clubs comes from other companies owned by the same regimes. This indicates that capital injections happen in a closed loop and the regimes themselves are fueling the financial intake of the sports clubs.

Regarding the investment into hosting the Formula 1, Saudi Arabia, once again, deals with an unprofitable investment. First, it is rather costly to host such an event. Saudi Arabia's 15-year deal with Formula 1 will cost the kingdom €60.4 million annually where simultaneously nations rarely make profits from hosting the Formula 1 (Siddarth, 2021; Siddarth, 2022). Moreover, the deal includes an additional sponsorship deal of €37.1 million per year with the state-owned oil company, Saudi Aramco (Edmonson, 2022). Additionally, in order to build the infrastructure necessary to host Formula 1, an initial investment of around €500 million is needed (Watson, 2022). These large sums of money spent on infrastructure and sponsorships indicate that the investments into hosting Formula 1 in Saudi Arabia is, like the investment in NUFC, not likely to turn out profitable.

We deem that the sports investments carried out by Saudi Arabia have another purpose than being financially beneficial for the general public or indeed profitable investments. Scholars such as Grand & Wolff (2020) argue that the \$650 million earmarked for developing Saudi sports infrastructure will increase public health. Indeed, Alqathani et al. (2020) analyzed and described how the degree of physical inactivity of the adult population in Saudi Arabia is higher compared to similar countries and that there is a high potential for savings on public healthcare if this is addressed. Reda & Viviez (2020) agree, and by comparing data from Europe and UEFA, they argue that the social return on the earmarked \$650 million for national sports investments in Saudi Arabia could be as high as \$2 billion. This return, it is theorized by Reda & Viviez (2020), would stem from savings on healthcare mainly associated with avoided cases of diabetes and heart diseases, the positive social impact on communities that the discipline and education of sports bring, and, lastly, the direct economic activity generated through membership fees, merchandise and travel, etc. Despite this investment into national sports infrastructure, Saudi Arabia is mostly investing in hosting events or investing in sports franchises outside the country, e.g., the NUFC acquisition and hosting the Formula 1 Grand Prix. There is less investment going to citizens in general to become more active (Grand & Wolff, 2020).

Furthermore, the economic benefits of improved health will take decades before it starts to significantly see the savings from the improved public health (Jain, 2022). As such, hosting or investing in foreign sports clubs does little to realize the actual economic and societal benefits outlined by Reda & Viviez (2020) and Grand & Wolff (2020) but rather divert national and international attention away from their human rights issues and high unemployment levels (Telegraph 1). Purchasing NUFC or hosting Formula 1 races will not yield savings on public health care as these sports are inaccessible to the wider population. This in turn feeds back to the argument that the purpose of Saudi Arabia's sports investments are not for them to be profitable but rather for them to be sportswashing vehicles.

Concludingly, in order to determine the extent to which Saudi sports investments can be considered sportswashing, we have considered Saudi Arabia's incentives and tools to conduct sportswashing. Additionally, we have portrayed the results of the kingdom's sports investments. Primarily, Saudi Arabia's incentives to engage in sportswashing activities are driven by the kingdom's bad reputation in the West. The articles analyzed and coded in this thesis provide, as accounted for above, rather uniform results. Namely, that the media, discursively, covers Saudi sports investments with an overwhelmingly negative sentiment and that the majority of articles categorize the Saudi sports investments as sportswashing. In terms of sportswashing tools, the presence of state capitalism in Saudi Arabia provides the country with sportswashing opportunities. As the state, either wholly or as a majority owner, owns the most crucial enterprises when it comes to sports investments, the country can use the market to promote political objectives, e.g., improving its international image. This is done through reputational, representational and cultural sportswashing where the hosting of sporting events and the acquisition of international sports franchises are the main sportswashing vehicles. As such, through the analysis we have outlined Saudi Arabia's incentives to sportswash and the tools by which they do so. This, combined with the sportswashing allegations in the media and the analysis section that proves that the Saudi sports investments are not made for financial purposes, leads us to conclude that the Saudi sports investments can, to a large extent, be considered sportswashing. Additionally, as the Saudi reputation remains negative in the Western media, the kingdom's sportswashing attempts has not been successful in the short run.

Discussion

Looking at the coverage of articles in Saudi media related to their sports investments paints a substantially contrasting picture. Rather than looking at western media that have a misalignment of political and cultural identities to Saudi Arabia, and has negative sentiments towards the kingdom, Saudi media tends to adopt a more lenient approach in terms of their coverage. We can highlight three articles from the Arab News network covering the acquisition of NUFC and hosting of Formula 1. In contrast to the Western articles, no mentions of violence, human rights violations or piracy was mentioned in any of the Arab News articles. Herein, Saudi Arabia is described as one of the “most amazing places in the world” (Arab News 1) and “dynamic, evolving rapidly, and populated by thoughtful and respectful individuals” (Arab News 3). Furthermore, the acquisition of NUFC is being labelled as a branding vehicle (Arab News 2) for state SOE’s and a project to build bridges and inspire coexistence with its people (Arab news 3). Clearly, this coverage paints a vastly different picture than what was seen with Western media. Interestingly, the Arab News network is to a large extent controlled by the Saudi ruling family, where the leveraging of ownership and coercion tied so closely with the regime, the Arab media is kept in line with the policies and strategies of the state (Yaghi, 2017). The analysis conducted on western media was firmly linked with sportswashing and due to the fact that Arab news is acting as a voice for the regime, claims for sportswashing are reinvigorated as the Saudi media can be seen as another link contributing to the sportswashing vehicle. To further this argument, the China study on media sentiment during the 2008 Beijing Olympics by Preuss & Alfs (2011) portrayed similar results to the above. Herein, national Chinese media was significantly more positive with regards to the coverage of the Olympic Games than Western media, in a similar vein as to how Saudi news were considerably more positive than Western media with regards to the coverage of Saudi sports investments.

The sports investments of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi media coverage of it have an additional sportswashing purpose in addition to improving the country’s international reputation, namely to wash the image of the regime among its citizens. Since Mohammad Bin Salman came to power, the country has grown more authoritarian and merciless towards dissidents (Telegraph 1; Freedom House, 2022). Therefore, the regime attempts to, through the Saudi media, fill the national conversation with sports and entertainment to ensure that the vacuum is not filled with critical political debate. For example, when Saudi Arabia hosted Formula 1 in 2021, the hype around the sporting event dominated the national conversation for weeks and the topic trended on Twitter in Saudi Arabia,

causing the country to reach the eight largest number of Twitter users globally (Ibid.) (Statista, 2022). Furthermore, the internal sportswashing attempts of Saudi Arabia are primarily aimed at the youngest generation of Saudis who make up the bulk of sports and entertainment consumers in the country (Telegraph 1). While the extravagant global sporting events that Saudi Arabia brings to the country are highly popular among the youngest generation of Saudis, few of them can afford to attend these. Although Saudi Arabia has published no official numbers of unemployment, it is estimated that the unemployment numbers for 18–35-year-olds are north of 25% (Grand & Wolff) (Telegraph 1). Effectively, Saudi Arabia needs to deliver more than a million new jobs to alleviate this problem. The regime has promised to deliver 40.000 of those through sports investments, however, the number of jobs created in relation to their sports investments is much lower and not likely to reach the target number (Grand & Wolff, 2020). Thus, the promises from the Saudi government to create new jobs through sports and the attempts to use national media to fill the national conversation with sports has effectively been a cover to justify the country's investments into sports with the true purpose being to improve Saudi Arabia's international reputation as well as controlling national conversation to avoid critical political debate.

Alternative Philosophical Positions

Had we gone about with answering the research question in a different way, another philosophical position, than that of moderated constructivism, would perhaps have been more appropriate. As constructivists, the authors of this thesis attach great importance to ideas, beliefs and social constructs. Hence, the idea of analyzing how media outlets discursively describes Saudi sports investments and thus deciding to what extend those investments can be *considered* sportswashing. Another, more positivist approach would be to analyze whether Saudi sports investments are, *de facto*, sportswashing. If that approach had been utilized, analyzing media content would not have been an appropriate method. Instead, we would have executed research that would have given us observable results allowing for as little interpretation as possible and as much objectivity as possible, since (strong) positivists only acknowledge the existence of what is observable and consider social reality to exist independently from the human mind (Welch et al., 2016). However, as the intention with engaging in sportswashing activities is to improve one's reputation, social constructs should not be neglected. Thus, much in alignment with the argument put forth by Vyas (2013), studying the existence of sportswashing requires attaching importance to the human mind and its subjectivity,

hence the irrelevance of positivism. As such, if the thesis had been written from a positivist position, it would have had to be from the moderated version, as moderated positivism would still have allowed the use of quantitative methods to discover probabilistic regularities applied in this analysis. For instance, by analyzing the tangible economic side of sports investments, the thesis could potentially have considered it a probabilistic regularity that such investments do not turn out profitable. Hence, there must be another reason than a financial one for investing in sports. However, the thesis could not have analyzed the content of media, thus, disabling us from concluding whether Saudi sports investments can be *considered* sportswashing.

From a critical realist point of view, a way to go about with answering the research question of this thesis would be to uncover underlying mechanisms that could explain the extent to which sportswashing is apparent in Saudi sports investments. Doing so would require first to identify mechanism that potentially can explain the existence of sportswashing and that take the shape of social structures. This could, e.g., be institutional structures in Saudi Arabia that allow for the existence of state capitalism or other mechanisms that incentivize the kingdom to sportswash. Thus, the goal of research would be to obtain a deepened understanding of those structures from which certain, objective, knowledge can arrive (Buch-Hansen, 2021). As such, critical realists would perhaps criticize the nature of the research of this thesis by arguing that too much importance is attached to (inter)subjective aspects of reality. As such, the objective nature of social structures have been purposely neglected. Nonetheless, this thesis deems the subjective aspects of social reality more critical than ‘objective’ ones as it is the subjective opinions that matter when seeking to determine if Saudi sports investments can be considered sportswashing.

Alternative Methodological Approaches

Another way in which this thesis could have determined the extent to which Saudi sports investments can be considered sportswashing is by conducting a discourse analysis. Constructivists attach great importance to discourse, in order to make sense of the social world (Buch-Hansen, 2021). Executing such discourse analysis would also allow for analyzing whether Saudi sports investments are considered sportswashing, by analyzing articles in media outlets. However, the analysis would have been different. First, executing a discourse analysis would have provided the opportunity of going into greater detail of what the media, qualitatively and discursively, is stating or arguing. That is, a part of the qualitative analysis would have been conducted more in depth, namely the discursive part.

I.e., we would have paid more attention to the language use of the media, e.g., the construction of sentences that might reveal aspects of intended meaning (Bryman, 2016). Discourse analysis would also have come with limitations, particularly the lack of quantitative analysis. Quantitative analysis was used as a springboard for the qualitative analysis in this thesis. This provided the framework for the creation of a coding scheme encouraging replicability and transparency. Furthermore, it is deemed that inter-coder reliability would have suffered if discourse analysis was used as the intended meaning could have been derived differently amongst the researchers. Therefore, content analysis was considered the most appropriate method for answering the research question, in line with previous academic studies.

Conclusion

To answer the research question, “*To what extent can Saudi sports investments be considered sportswashing?*”, this thesis has relied on the soft power theory developed by Nye Jr (2011) and Hall (2010) and the state capitalism theory, as well as the current literature on sportswashing. With this literature as the foundation, a framework that describes the dynamics of sportswashing was developed in the theory section of the thesis. The analysis followed this framework and based on the results of the content analysis it initially outlined how Saudi Arabia’s poor international reputation incentivizes the country to sportswash the country’s image. Secondly, the analysis utilized the sportswashing framework, in conjunction with state-capitalism theory, to examine the sportswashing tools available to Saudi Arabia. This demonstrated how the interplay between regime policies and investment institutions enable high-profile sports investments to take place. Then, the content analysis looked directly at allegations towards sportswashing and how the cases of the NUFC acquisition, Formula 1, golf and boxing was used as sportswashing vehicles by the country.

Furthermore, a comparison to similar cases in China and Qatar, analyze the immediate effect of the Saudi sports investments on media sentiment, and by extension their international reputation, showing that the country’s attempts to improve their international reputation has, so far, been unsuccessful. This was followed by an analysis of the financial aspects of Saudi Arabia’s sports investments where, by analyzing the current return on their sports investments and comparing the Saudi ventures to similar cases from Abu Dhabi and Qatar, it was shown that the Saudi sports investments are not profitable and will not be in the short to mid-term. This indicates that the investments were not conducted for financial purposes but rather are being used as sportswashing vehicles. Furthermore, it

was shown in the discussion section of the thesis that, while the Saudi media portrays the Saudi investments differently than the Western media, this is but another part of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing strategy. In sum, as signified by the tri-part reasoning that Saudi Arabia has clear incentives to sportswash, they have the tools to sportswash and that there are clear allegations of sportswashing in the media, the Saudi sports investments can, to a large extent, be considered sportswashing.

Further research

As earlier argued, due to the recency of the Saudi sports investments, it is difficult to assess the long-term effects of these investments on the country's international reputation. Therefore, this thesis has examined the current Saudi sports investments and their immediate effect. However, for further research, it could be valuable to utilize a longitudinal research design. This could shed light on the long-term effect of Saudi Arabia's sportswashing attempts, for example by comparing the media sentiment towards Saudi Arabia before they conducted these investments and after the country conducted them, or it could be done by revisiting the subject when the Saudi sports investments have had more time to make an impact. Likewise, this thesis has argued, based on the current financial results of their sports investments and the comparison with similar cases from Abu Dhabi and Qatar, that the Saudi sports investments are not profitable in the short to medium-term. It is therefore difficult to assess the long-term financial impact of these investments because of their recency. Again, revisiting the investments later with a longitudinal research design might show that the investments are also not profitable in the long-term or unveil that the Saudi sports investments evolve to be profitable, or determine if the Western perception of Saudi Arabia has improved.

This thesis has considered Saudi sports investments and analyzed the degree to which those are considered to be executed with the intention of improving the reputation of the kingdom. As mentioned, the broad conclusion is that said investments can, to a large extent, be considered sportswashing. In order to identify whether the Saudi Arabia is a standalone case, it is suggested that further research should build upon analyzing similar sports investments executed by other nations. This provides the opportunity to do a cross-sectional analysis comparing the underlying intentions behind sports investments carried out by different nations. For example, it would be interesting to analyze the sentiment in media coverage of all Formula 1 host nations. In this vein, a cross sectional analysis would collect media sentiment regarding articles related to the country and their hosting of

Formula 1. This would allow the analysis of, for example, whether hosting Formula 1 in Monaco is considered sportswashing to a similar degree to hosting Formula 1 in Saudi Arabia.

The third and last recommendation for further research is to apply the sportswashing framework of looking at incentives, tools and results to Western sports investments. This would investigate the nature of sportswashing and test the framework presented in our work. In doing so, one could contribute to the understanding of sportswashing to assess whether it is a western construct or the phenomenon can be applied to Western sports investments as well. A study with this intention would provide a telling perspective to both the accused and the accusers of sportswashing as it may be the case that sportswashing is a phenomenon only attached to countries with policies that are misaligned with Western ideologies. For example, Chadwick (2018) pertains that more research on the topic of sportswashing is crucial in order to begin applying the concept to one country rather than another. Furthermore, the presence of poor working conditions in some industries in Britain raises the question as to why Britain's use of the Premier League as a soft power tool is not labelled as sportswashing (Ibid.). To answer this question, applying the framework developed in this thesis, the extent to which Britain has incentives and tools to conduct sportswashing could be assessed, comparatively to the findings of this thesis.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Coding schedule including number of references coded to each of the dimensions and categories

Categories	Dimensions				
	Reputation (ref: 400)		Sentiment (ref: 703)	Sport Investment (ref: 258)	Sportswashing Allegations (ref: 198)
Human Rights (ref: 161)	Womens Rights (ref: 50)	Negative (ref: 508)	Boxing (ref: 17)		Total refs (neg- neupos)
	Kashoggi (ref: 68)		F1 (ref: 79)		
Piracy (ref: 113)	Neutral (ref: 136)		Newcastle United FC (ref: 119)		
Yemen Crisis (ref: 22)			Golf (ref: 29)		
Partnerships (ref: 18)	Positive (ref: 59)		Spanish Super Cup		

	Progressive Change (ref: 34)		(ref: 14)		
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