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The importance of context in understanding football fans' reactions to corporate stadia naming rights sponsorships

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The importance of context in understanding football fans' reactions to corporate stadia naming rights sponsorships

Abstract

Purpose: This study explores fans' reactions to corporate naming rights sponsorship of football club stadia, and identifies a range of contextual factors impacting these reactions.

Design/methodology/approach: A qualitative, quasi-ethnographic research design is adopted, focusing on three football clubs in North West England. Data are gathered through online message board discussions, focus groups and auto-ethnographic approaches.

Findings: Geographic, image and functional dimensions of sponsorship fit are noted as contextual factors in determining fans' reactions to corporate stadium names. It is also proposed that some forms of fit (in particular geographic fit) are more important than others in this regard. Beyond issues of fit, three additional contextual factors are identified that potentially influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium names: prior involvement with the club by the sponsor; fans' perceived impact of the sponsorship investment; and whether the stadium is new or long-established.

Research implications: Future research might examine the relative importance and implications of the identified contextual factors, alongside seeking other potential areas of contextual framing.

Practical implications: Sponsorship naming rights negotiations need to be sensitive to a variety of contextual factors. Furthermore, sponsors would do well to have a good awareness of their own brand image and its congruency with the identity of the club and fan base.

Originality/value: This nuanced, qualitative analysis extends existing, quantitative-based research by identifying a range of contextual factors which shape fans' reactions to corporate stadium naming.

Keywords: sponsorship; fit; naming rights; stadia; sport; fans

Article classification: Research paper

Introduction

The trading of stadia naming rights, or ‘selling home’ (Boyd, 2000), has become a widespread aspect of sports sponsorship over the last 40 years. This practice differs from other sports sponsorships, typically relating to kits and events, which are examined extensively in the marketing literature (e.g. Bruhn and Holzer, 2015; Gwinner and Eaton, 1999; Grohs *et al.*, 2015; Kwon *et al.*, 2016; Madrigal, 2000; Nufer and Bühler, 2010; Roy and Cornwell, 2003). Specifically, stadia and their surroundings are places to which fans, and others, may feel strongly attached (see Boyd, 2000; Reysen *et al.*, 2012).

Such attachment was evident in the 2011 debacle over the renaming of Newcastle United Football Club’s St James Park stadium, so named since 1880, to the ‘Sports Direct Arena’. The club’s owners argued that this change signaled the financial potential of Newcastle United to prospective sponsors, and that the former name was no longer “commercially attractive” (BBC, 2011). In response, fans took direct action, painting the original name on the stadium’s perimeter wall (BBC, 2012); and by 2013, the old name was reinstated (Edwards, 2012), suggesting that fan reactions to corporate stadium names are an important element in their potential as sponsorship vehicles.

Given the prevalence of corporate stadium (re) naming and the scale of investment it continues to attract in football/soccer¹ and other sports/entertainment venues (Vuolteenaho *et al.*, 2018), the practice remains an under-developed research area within the sponsorship literature, which to-date has taken a predominantly survey-based, quantitative approach (e.g. Nakazawa *et al.*, 2016; Eddy, 2014; Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014; Reysen *et al.*, 2012). In this regard, significant work has been carried out by Woisetschläger *et al.* (2014) in this journal, examining factors influencing fans’ reactions to the corporate renaming of Borussia Dortmund’s stadium. Existing studies emphasise a binary dimension of fan acceptance or resistance to stadium renaming. Resistance emanates from perceived threats of corporate stadium (re) naming to both club distinctiveness and fans’ self-identity as followers of the

¹ The term “football” is subsequently used throughout this paper, privileging the voice of the fans studied. However, it is recognised this could be substituted for “soccer” in a North American context.

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3 club (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014; Reysen *et al.*, 2012). By contrast, a key factor influencing
4 acceptance is the fit between sponsor and club (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014).
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10 These existing quantitative studies provide a critical contribution to understanding fan reactions to
11 naming rights sponsorship. However, no two sponsorships (including naming rights) are necessarily
12 the same, and all parties in the relationship (sponsor, rights holder, fans and other stakeholders) are
13 able to contribute towards a range of contextual factors that combine to form unique sponsorship
14 cases. Nonetheless, Reysen *et al.* (2012) note the lack of any detailed examination of how context
15 might influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium re-naming. Addressing this lacuna serves as a
16 central motivation for this study. The paper adopts a detailed, contrasting case-based (Stake, 2005)
17 qualitative inquiry approach. In so doing, it adds a layer of complexity to existing quantitative work,
18 by shedding further insight on the importance of context in underpinning fans' reactions to naming
19 rights sponsorship and the resulting explanations offered. The research is framed by one central
20 research question: What are the contextual factors influencing fans' reactions to the corporate
21 (re)naming of their team's football stadium?
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37 In addressing this question, the paper develops two key contributions. First, in line with previous
38 studies, it is recognised that different dimensions of sponsorship fit can act as contextual factors in
39 determining fans' reactions to corporate stadium names. However, building on this existing work, it is
40 proposed that certain forms of fit, and thereby certain aspects of context, are more important than
41 others in this regard. The second contribution proposes that there are additional, and previously
42 undocumented, contextual factors beyond fit (both sponsored-property related and sponsor-related)
43 that combine to shape fans' reactions to corporate stadium renaming. Overall, the research reveals that
44 because contextual factors are so highly variable, there is no simple and replicable strategic marketing
45 communications formula for the application and implementation of naming rights sponsorships in
46 football or beyond.
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3 The research is based on three English football clubs that have all undergone corporate stadium re-
4 naming within the last 20 years. Two cases involve relocated and newly built stadia. However, the
5 location of the third club's stadium has remained unchanged for over a century. The paper begins with
6 a discussion of extant literature on corporate stadium (re)naming, before focusing on theoretical
7 frameworks relating to sponsorship fit, gratitude and social identity theory, which have relevance to
8 the interpretation of empirical data. The research approach is outlined, before findings are presented
9 and discussed. The paper concludes by discussing theoretical contributions, managerial implications,
10 limitations and areas for future research.
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22 **Corporate stadium (re)naming**

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24 As with other sponsorship contexts, an important motivation for corporate entities to engage in
25 stadium (re)naming is brand awareness (Crompton and Howard, 2003), resulting from a greater
26 number of brand name mentions, mostly via media reporting (Reysen *et al.*, 2012). This can facilitate
27 the sponsor's brand image enhancement (Roy and Cornwell, 1999), brand positioning (Hartland *et al.*,
28 2005) and sales (Lough and Irwin, 2001). Occasionally, corporate stadium naming seems intertwined
29 with corporate social responsibility (Plewa and Quester, 2011), particularly at a local level. Thus,
30 where sponsors are perceived to have made a significant contribution to providing the local
31 community with a new stadium, they are viewed more favourably (DeSchraver and Jensen, 2003).
32 Previous work on corporate naming rights sponsorship has also examined its impact on variables
33 including brand attitude, word-of-mouth intention (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014) and purchase
34 intention (Eddy, 2014).
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50 Many empirical studies of corporate stadium renaming have focused on US college sports (e.g. Eddy,
51 2014; Reysen *et al.*, 2012). Similar work in a European professional team sports context has tended to
52 examine football; perhaps unsurprising given the game's popularity and the prevalence of corporate
53 stadium naming in the sport (Vuolteenaho *et al.*, 2018). In this context, studies of fan reactions to
54 corporate stadium (re)naming have identified some negative outcomes, manifest in fans' hostility
55 towards sponsors; refusal to use a stadium's new name (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014); anger; and
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3 perceived harm to the distinctiveness of the team (Reysen *et al.*, 2012; Boyd, 2000). The Newcastle
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5 United example above illustrates how this can lead fans to demand that an original, non-corporate
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7 stadium name be reinstated. Such occurrences may create negative publicity, potentially causing the
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9 sponsor's brand more harm than good (Crompton, 2014). Alternatively, where fans believe the club
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11 benefits significantly from a naming rights agreement, or where there is a strong perceived fit between
12
13 naming sponsor and club, resistance is reduced (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014).
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18 Eddy (2014) suggests the naming rights landscape in US college sports is similar to that in many other
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20 sports worldwide, indicating that the actual sport itself does not have significant bearing on fan
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22 reactions to corporate stadium naming. What is perhaps more relevant here, is context at a club level
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24 (Eddy, 2014), including factors such as differences in club financial security, which may influence
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26 reactions to corporate stadium renaming (Reysen *et al.*, 2012). The between-club variability of such
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28 contextual factors proves problematic for generalising from existing quantitative studies, and
29
30 highlights the value of the qualitative approach adopted here in capturing rich and nuanced data on the
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32 phenomenon. A greater understanding of the contextual factors (and their interaction) that shape fan
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34 reactions to stadium naming rights sponsorships should facilitate practitioner decision making in this
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36 area (Chen and Zhang, 2011). One factor which has attracted considerable attention in previous work
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38 on sponsorship is the fit between club and sponsor.
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43 **Sponsorship fit**

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45 Fit has been conceptualised in terms of complementarity (Aaker and Keller, 1990), and the logic of a
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47 particular brand sponsoring a particular property (Olson and Thjømmøe, 2011). Thus, fit might be
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49 broadly defined in terms of similarity, consistency, 'making sense' (Simmons and Becker-Olsen,
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51 2006), and a perceived logical connection between sponsor and sponsee (Speed and Thompson,
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53 2000). Higher perceived levels of fit (or congruity) between sponsor and sponsored property can lead
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55 to more favourable attitudes towards naming rights sponsors (Chen and Zhang, 2011). Considerable
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57 empirical evidence exists to support the influence of fit on consumer responses to sponsorship
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59 (Petrovici *et al.*, 2015; McDaniel, 1999), including: sponsor identification (Johar and Pham, 1999);
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3 attitude towards the sponsor (Bruhn and Holzer, 2015; Gwinner and Bennett, 2008; Olson and
4 Thjømøe, 2011; Weeks *et al.*, 2008; Becker-Olsen and Hill, 2006; Rifon *et al.*, 2004; Roy and
5 Cornwell, 2003); attitude towards the sponsorship (Mazodier and Merunka, 2012; Simmons and
6 Becker-Olsen, 2006); sponsor brand image (Grohs and Reisinger, 2014); and purchase intention
7 (Speed and Thompson, 2000). Equally, perceived incongruity (or mis-fit) can harm evaluations of -
8 and the equity attached to - both sponsor (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2010) and sponsored property (Groza
9 *et al.*, 2012). However, articulation of fit in formal announcements of naming rights sponsorships can
10 aid positive brand attitude formation for incongruent sponsors (Skard and Thorbjørnsen, 2017).
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22 The literature on sponsorship fit is extensive (see Olson and Thjømøe, 2011) with studies adopting
23 different conceptualisations and measures of the fit construct (see Exhibit 1 in Olson and Thjømøe
24 (2011) for an overview). Fit is frequently divided into either direct (functional/product-related) fit, or
25 indirect (image-based) fit (McDonald, 1991; Gwinner, 1997). Furthermore, Olson and Thjømøe
26 (2011) suggest that overall fit may comprise elements of sponsor product relevance, attitude
27 similarity, geographic similarity, audience similarity and sponsorship duration. It would thus appear
28 that fit is multidimensional, comprising functional, geographic and image-based dimensions. These
29 can be considered as bases of fit upon which fans might draw in articulating their reaction towards a
30 corporate stadium name. Regardless of the dimensions included, sponsorship fit may be enhanced by
31 prior attitude towards the sponsor (Nakazawa *et al.*, 2016); perceived sponsor sincerity
32 (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2010); sponsor's regional identification; and perceived benefits (often
33 financial) to the sponsored property (Woisetschläger and Haselhoff, 2009). This last aspect relates
34 closely to notions of gratitude inherent in conceptualisations of sponsorship, often used to articulate
35 fan acceptance of corporate money in sport.
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54 **Sponsorship and gratitude**

55 Sponsorship has been contrasted with advertising in terms of goodwill (McDonald, 1991; Meenaghan
56 1991, 2001), with the former received in a "halo of goodwill" generated by the perceived benefit
57 accruing to the sponsored property, most notably at the individual sports club level (Meenaghan,
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3 2001: 101). Here, goodwill is defined as “the positive attitude consumers convey toward a sponsor
4 that supports and facilitates an event, team, or cause in which they are passionate” (Dees *et al.*,
5 2008:81). This differential response towards sponsorship (cf. advertising) has led scholars to suggest
6 gratitude – defined as “the positive recognition of benefits received” (Emmons, 2004:5) – as a
7 sponsorship outcome (Kim *et al.*, 2018). Gratitude is, therefore, deemed to include a sense of
8 appreciation, goodwill, and a resultant disposition to act positively towards the source (Fitzgerald,
9 1998). This urge to act through feelings of gratitude links with notions of reciprocity (Kim *et al.*,
10 2018; Morales, 2005; Palmatier *et al.*, 2009).

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22 In the context of sports teams, feelings of gratitude can mediate the relationship between sponsorship
23 and consumer outcomes, such as word-of-mouth and purchase intention (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Kim *et al.*,
24 2010). Feelings of gratitude might be driven by altruistic motives being attributed to the sponsorship,
25 perceived value of the sponsorship received (Kim *et al.*, 2018; Tsang, 2007), and perceived effort of
26 the sponsor (Morales, 2005). The latter two can be seen as ‘investments’ by corporate entities in
27 achieving marketing outcomes. However, in a sports sponsorship context, Kim *et al.* (2018) found
28 that perceived investment (as distinct from the perceived value/benefit to the recipient) did not have a
29 significant impact on gratitude. There are also, arguably, first-mover advantages, with early sponsors
30 engendering greater levels of gratitude than later, so-called, ‘bandwagon’ sponsors (Meenaghan,
31 2001).

32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 **Social identity theory**

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47 Jones (2000: 283) identifies football fandom as a “serious leisure activity”, where participation (or
48 not) can be explained with reference to *social identity theory* (Tajfel, 1974). Social identity refers to
49 “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a
50 social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that
51 membership” (Tajfel, 1981: 255). Further, social identity theory posits that people are motivated to
52 enhance their self-concept (or self-esteem) by becoming members of social groups and making social
53 comparisons that bolster the status of the ‘ingroup’ (to which they belong) at the expense of the
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3 'outgroup' (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). This is particularly relevant with spectator sports, where fans
4 are more likely to favour supporters of their own club, which they see as an extension of themselves,
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6 whilst criticising those from opposition clubs (Fink *et al.*, 2009).
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11 Any threat to the status of the ingroup (e.g. supporters of a particular club) is thus a threat to the self-
12 esteem of its members. When individuals experience (or fear) negative evaluations of the ingroup,
13 they are motivated to employ identity-maintenance strategies to protect their self-concept (Tajfel and
14 Turner, 1979). These fall into three categories; social mobility, social creativity and social
15 competition strategies (Doyle *et al.*, 2017). *Social mobility* strategies include leaving the group or
16 psychologically (and overtly) distancing oneself from it (e.g. by using detaching pronouns, such as
17 'they' rather than 'we', or not wearing apparel signalling group membership; Cialdini *et al.*, 1976).
18 Such actions are characterised as CORFing (Cutting Off Reflected Failure; Snyder *et al.* 1986), and
19 regarded as realistic options only for those who do not identify strongly with the group (Fink *et al.*,
20 2009). *Social creativity* strategies include downplaying the importance of the dimension(s) on which
21 intergroup comparisons are made (e.g. sporting performance), shifting parameters to allow for more
22 favourable ingroup evaluations (e.g. to the size and nature of support in the stadium), or changing the
23 composition of the outgroup to facilitate more positive comparisons (Tajfel and Turner, 1979).
24 Alternatively, members may seek to reframe negative evaluations as positive ingroup attributes (e.g.
25 from 'aggressive and hostile' to 'strong and passionate'). They could also seek to protect their identity
26 by re-categorising the entire group as belonging to a superior superordinate group, or by identifying
27 with a particular sub-group that is less inferior than other sub-groups (Blanz *et al.*, 1998). *Social*
28 *competition* strategies involve seeking to improve the relative standing of the ingroup by diminishing
29 that of the outgroup; either physically through violence and intimidation, or verbally via hostile
30 criticism, ridicule or derogation of the outgroup - termed 'blasting' by Cialdini and Richardson
31 (1980).
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58 A club's stadium arguably constitutes an important aspect of fan identity, representing not merely an
59 association to the club brand (Ross *et al.*, 2006), but part of the fan's extended self (Belk, 1988) and a
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3 place within which fans feel emotional and topophilic embeddedness (Edensor and Millington, 2008).
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5 As such, stadium renaming by a corporate sponsor could be a threat to ingroup distinctiveness (Eddy,
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7 2014; Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014), to the point that it triggers identity-maintenance strategies (Doyle
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9 *et al.*, 2017) and concomitant resistance to that renaming (Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2014; Reysen *et al.*,
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11 2012). Here, framing the corporate sponsor as an ‘outsider’ to be resisted helps galvanise ingroup
12
13 consistency. Other *social creativity* strategies (Doyle *et al.*, 2017) can be employed in response to
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15 corporate stadium sponsorship. For example, fans might reinforce positive aspects of the ingroup
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17 (Wann and Branscombe, 1995) by developing a shared positive reaction to their club’s sponsors
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19 (Dalakas and Levin, 2005; Madrigal, 2000), and ultimately allowing for the sponsor to be included in
20
21 the ingroup. Questions of whether, when and why football fans consider a stadium sponsor to be a
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23 threat to their self-concept, and which, if any, identity-maintenance strategies they employ in
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25 response, are clearly important and potentially complex. This suggests that social identity theory
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27 provides a useful lens through which to develop a deeper understanding of fan reactions to corporate
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29 stadium naming rights sponsorship.
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35 **The clubs**

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37 This study examines three football clubs, located in Greater Manchester, UK, which have changed
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39 their stadia names in the last 20+ years to one associated with a corporate sponsor. One club, Bolton
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41 Wanderers, has (re)named its stadium three times in this period. The first instance coincided with a
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43 move from Burnden Park, where the club had played since 1895, to the newly built (and corporately
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45 named) Reebok Stadium in 1997, with a subsequent corporate renaming to Macron Stadium in 2014.
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47 Both Reebok and Macron are sportswear brands. In August 2018, the club announced a third
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49 renaming to the University of Bolton Stadium (Bolton Wanderers FC, 2018). This took place after the
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51 data collection phase of the study and was therefore not discussed by participants.
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57 The second club, Manchester City, also represents an example of corporate naming of a newly built
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59 stadium, following relocation from Maine Road, where the team had played since 1923, to a new
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stadium in East Manchester in 2003 (originally built for the 2002 Commonwealth Games and then

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3 known as the City of Manchester Stadium). In 2011, the club agreed a deal with Manchester City
4 Council (the stadium owners), securing control of naming rights in return for an increase in rent
5 payments. A 10-year naming rights deal was subsequently signed with the airline operator Etihad
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9 (Taylor, 2011).
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13 The final club, Oldham Athletic, has played at its current stadium since 1899. Until 2014, this stadium
14 was called Boundary Park, but was renamed SportsDirect.com Park following a five-year naming
15 rights deal with this sportswear manufacturer/retailer (BBC, 2014). At the time of the research, these
16 clubs played at different levels within the English professional football league structure: Manchester
17 City in the Premier League (top tier); Bolton Wanderers in the Championship (second tier); and
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29 Oldham Athletic in League One (third tier).
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31 **Method**

32 As noted above, previous studies of corporate stadium (re)naming in the sponsorship literature have
33 employed survey-based, quantitative approaches. However, this is not the most effective approach for
34 gaining the rich and ‘thick’ (Geertz, 1973) phenomenological insights from fans, befitting the current
35 research question. Accordingly, this study’s findings draw on various qualitative data sources
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39 resulting from a quasi-ethnographic research approach (Murtagh, 2007). Phase one involved engaging
40 fans from Manchester City and Bolton Wanderers in online message board discussions on the
41 (re)naming of their clubs’ stadia, drawing on principles of netnography (Kozinets, 2015). Permission
42 was sought, but not received, from Oldham Athletic fan message boards; accordingly, the club was
43 not included in this phase. The researchers identified themselves on message boards and clearly
44 outlined the purpose of the research. Permission was requested to use data from message board
45 participants, and only quotes pertaining to such permissions being granted are presented below.
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56 The second phase involved focus groups with fans of the three clubs, each involving between four and
57 six participants, moderated by one or two of the authors. Focus groups lasted between 45-60 minutes,
58 and were based around a series of open-ended topic prompts informed by previous message board
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3 discussions. Thus, at the broadest level, questions covered issues such as like/dislike of relevant
4 corporate stadium names and the reasons for this, and the relationship between corporate stadium
5 names and financial investment in the club. Several club-specific prompts were included where
6 relevant (e.g. the change of corporate names was discussed with Bolton fans). Focus group
7 moderation guided discussions but allowed for diversion from topics in line with prevailing
8 conversations. One focus group (Manchester City fans) took place at a nearby university, while the
9 others were undertaken at pubs in Bolton and Oldham. As Oldham Athletic fans had not been
10 included in the previous phase, two focus groups were held with them.

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13 Recruitment of focus group participants used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling
14 approaches (Bryman, 2004), as it was important to identify fans with a high level of attachment to the
15 clubs, where the stadium (re)naming might be an issue of interest, or even concern. It was not,
16 therefore, the intention to select focus group participants representative of all fan types, were this even
17 possible (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Initial participant recruitment took place via advertisements posted
18 on message boards and social media, through supporters' associations, and from researchers' personal
19 contacts. Those responding positively to participation in the study were then asked to recommend
20 other fans who may wish to take part, in order to widen the sample.

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23 All focus group participants received a £10 Amazon gift certificate as a 'thank you' for giving up their
24 time. Participants ranged in age from 20-69, of which 14 were male and four female. This ratio is
25 indicative of the recognised gender split in English football fans (EFL, 2015). Prior to their
26 participation, and in order to provide balance between transparency and the avoidance of priming
27 effects, participants were instructed that the purpose was to understand fans' reactions to changes in
28 the name of their club's stadium, including their associated thoughts, feelings and behaviours. All
29 participants gave consent to include quotes in the publication of research findings. Table 1 provides
30 an overview of participants for each focus group. No evidence was found for the effect of any
31 demographic variables (e.g. gender, age) on responses given. All focus groups were transcribed and,
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together with the downloaded transcripts of online message board threads, this amounted to 150 pages of text as a rich and multi-voiced fan discourse.

Table 1: Focus group participants

Manchester City	Oldham Athletic (Group 1)	Oldham Athletic (Group 2)	Bolton Wanderers
4 males Aged between 40 and 55	5 males Aged between 20 and 69	3 males 2 females Aged between 25 and 65	2 males 2 females Aged between 25 and 69

A third, auto-ethnographic phase involved two researchers attending matches at the three clubs, to spend time amongst fans. On these occasions, the researchers also walked the immediate environs of the stadia to ascertain connections with current/former stadium names in the built urban fabric; e.g. in street names or local businesses. Observations were documented in field notes.

Following Abdallah and Langley (2014) and Heracleous (2006), analysis began from the position of viewing all data (message board posts, focus group transcripts and field notes) as text. Against the broad backdrop of the central research question (i.e. determining what contextual factors might influence fans' reactions to the corporate (re) naming of their team's football stadium), the researchers undertook an inductive and iterative form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved building up an initial set of themes after coding the message board data and then reorganising, revising and modifying them following the coding of focus group data and field notes. Emphasising a need for quality and reflexivity checks, the process was initially undertaken independently by each researcher. Subsequently, recognising the importance of confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1982), the authors met and collectively reviewed, negotiated and, where appropriate, merged their independent data interpretations. This allowed for further

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3 modification of key themes to emerge as part of a final, iterative negotiation step in the analysis. The
4 findings emerging from this process are presented and discussed below.
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9 **Contexts of sponsorship fit**

10 In explaining reactions towards particular naming rights sponsors, fans drew on a number of fit-based
11 narratives, which appear intertwined with identity maintenance strategies. While fans did not employ
12 the term 'fit' in their explanations, notions of different bases of fit were clearly articulated, suggesting
13 that the fit concept (however expressed) resonates with fans and is employed in appraising naming
14 rights sponsorships.
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24 To understand fan conceptions of fit, it is helpful to start with a Bolton fan's statement that "'proper'
25 stadium names would be either the location of the stadium – what road they're on or the district"
26 (Bolton fan g), emphasising the importance of connections to the surrounding area. This logic
27 seemingly extends to sponsors with local links, evidenced in Bolton fans' positive reactions to the
28 former 'Reebok' stadium name, a brand with origins in the town. Here, these 'local' bases of fit were
29 the first to be proposed by fans, suggesting that geographic fit is a starting point for fan acceptance of
30 a naming rights sponsor. This is consistent with previous studies concerning the role and importance
31 of geographic fit (Olson and Thjømmøe, 2011; Woisetschläger *et al.*, 2017). It reflects how English
32 football clubs are deeply embedded in towns and cities (Edensor and Millington, 2008) with attempts
33 to relocate them being met with fierce resistance, as exemplified by the case of Wimbledon FC's
34 relocation to Milton Keynes (Goldblatt, 2014). Equally, football fandom is traditionally rooted in
35 support for a *local* club, which can become a manifestation of fans' wider self-identity as both fan of
36 the club and resident and/or native of a particular town, city or region (Edensor and Millington, 2008;
37 Giulianotti, 2002). Thus, narratives of geographic fit to articulate acceptance of naming rights
38 sponsorships are indicative of wider social forces in English football, of which potential sponsors
39 must be aware.
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3 Between Etihad and Manchester City there was no obvious geographic fit, but fans were flexible in
4 finding other forms of “symmetry” (Manchester City fan b) between sponsor and club to explain their
5 acceptance. This included notions of congruency in values and image between these two entities:
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9 “I like the fact that it was a new, up and coming company, the same as us. There’s a whole
10 new image for the club... We’re going into the Champions League where, quite frankly,
11 we’re not really wanted. We’re coming in as competitors to teams that have had it their own
12 way for donkey’s years and have looked down on us. And that was the impression I got about
13 Etihad as well. They’re suddenly coming into this market” (Manchester City fan b).
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20 Here, fit is apparently expressed in terms of a perceived degree of alignment between Etihad and the
21 club, in terms of their similar organisational and competitive strategic positioning. With reference to
22 social identity theory, this reflects a socially creative identity maintenance strategy, whereby club,
23 fans, and sponsor are categorised as belonging to a superordinate group (Blanz *et al.*, 1998) of vibrant,
24 anti-establishment interlopers or challengers. This suggests that, in the absence of geographic fit, fans’
25 attitudes towards a stadium naming sponsor can arise from their understanding of its relative brand
26 positioning within the market, and thus its perceived identity (i.e. image fit).
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37 The cases presented here indicate that fans employ narratives of fit to articulate acceptance of
38 corporate naming rights sponsors in a somewhat hierarchical manner, firstly seeking to explain
39 acceptance based on geography. Where this is absent, fans sequentially broaden and increasingly
40 abstract their appraisals to include image fit as a basis for acceptance. Whilst this shows how fit is an
41 important contextual factor in determining fans’ reactions to corporate stadium names, it also
42 demonstrates their willingness to work hard to accept a corporate stadium name and be flexible in
43 seeking bases of fit to support this decision. This suggests fans have a strong desire to find
44 congruence between sponsee and sponsor (Simmons and Becker-Olson, 2006), and to maintain the
45 ingroup consistency associated with the social identity of being a loyal fan (Tajfel, 1982; Wann and
46 Branscombe, 1995).
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3 As well as employing narratives of image fit to explain acceptance of corporate stadium names, fans
4 also draw on these narratives to articulate resistance (either actual or hypothetical) towards certain
5 corporate stadium names. For example, citing the sportswear manufacturer and retailer Sports Direct,
6 Bolton fans imagined a hypothetical scenario whereby functional fit would be cancelled out by a poor
7 image compared to other potential sponsors:
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13 “I think it’s different, isn’t it... I’m trying to give a good example... I know Sports Direct is
14 still sportswear but its association... [participant makes negative gesture]. Macron and
15 Reebok are sportswear, you know, good sportswear so they still got good... I don't know, it's
16 a positive brand, isn't it?” (Bolton fan a).
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22 These negative associations may be a reflection of fans’ perceptions of Sports Direct as a low-quality
23 sportswear brand, or perhaps their understanding of its corporate social responsibility practices: at the
24 time of data collection, a major news story surfaced about Sports Direct’s ‘gulag’-like working
25 conditions and poor contractual practices in the UK (Goodley and Ashby, 2015).
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32 Fans also employ strategies to reinforce a positive self/fan identity by openly expressing resistance
33 towards perceived undesirable sponsors on an image/ethical level. One example was the highlighting
34 of perceived unacceptable stadium names from other (not necessarily rival) clubs, as well as
35 hypothetical sponsor examples based on existing companies. These explanations were informed by
36 fans’ views of a sponsoring brand’s relative market positioning, with suggestions that a bad stadium
37 name is one linked to a brand perceived as representing cheapness or low value (i.e. poor image fit).
38 Thus, it was suggested that Home Bargains, a UK-based discount retailer, would be “embarrassing” as
39 a stadium name sponsor because “other fans would take the mickey” (Oldham fan h). Those fans
40 openly criticising the perceived poor fit of corporate naming sponsors for other club stadia in this way
41 are engaging in socially competitive identity-maintenance strategies (Doyle *et al.*, 2017); consciously
42 or unconsciously presenting an outgroup for comparison as a way of rationalising the suitability of
43 their own club’s stadium naming arrangements. This is arguably an example of ‘blasting’ (Cialdini
44 and Richardson, 1980), with fans reinforcing the perceived fit of *their* team’s naming rights sponsors
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3 through an ‘at least we’re not as bad as...’ narrative. Thus, by ridiculing another team’s sponsors, fans
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5 protect their own ingroup identity.
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9 Alongside sponsor brand image, fans apparently have difficulty in reconciling certain sponsor product
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11 categories with the image of their club and the resulting expression of their self-identity as a fan. In
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13 particular, there is resistance to the idea of payday loan providers as sponsors: “The danger is we’d
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15 have been called something like the Wonga Stadium... We wouldn’t want to be associated with that”
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17 (Bolton fan c). The stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963) of this particular product category reflects the
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19 perceived negative impact such companies have on working class communities in which football is
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21 often ardently followed – an example, perhaps of poor image/ethical and geographic fit combined. As
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23 one Oldham Fan explained:
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26 “Anybody with intelligence would not go with Wonga... Because it’s a lower class area. I
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28 mean, there’s higher-class areas and lower-class areas... So how do you expect the lower
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30 educated of Oldham to deal with things like that? They go, “Right, I need some money now,
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32 I’ll get a loan.” (Oldham fan a).
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34 Here, resonating with Ruth and Simonin (2003), fans react negatively to perceived threats to the
35
36 wellbeing of vulnerable people within their club’s wider community.
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40 Similar concerns were expressed regarding sponsors in the gambling sector, a subject that has
41
42 attracted attention and debate in media, policy, and academic spheres (e.g. BBC, 2016; Gambling
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44 Commission, 2014; Lamont *et al.*, 2011). From a purely functional fit perspective, there is a clear
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46 product attribute connection (Smith, 2004) between gambling and sport, as sport accounts for
47
48 approximately 13% of the total global gambling market (Statista, 2017). However, most participants
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50 considered gambling a negative product category and gambling companies as undesirable sponsors:
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53 “It will happen sooner or later, you just hope you are not the first one... a company like
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55 that... a betting company, eventually it will get rights to a stadium and you don’t want that”
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57 (Bolton fan b).
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3 Thus, fans appear to prioritise image/ethical fit over functional fit in determining reactions to
4 particular corporate stadium names. When confronted with a potential sponsor whose perceived
5 ethical record or stance does not match that desired of their club, the language of image fit is
6 employed as a narrative device to explain resistance. Thus, fans appear to have a threshold up to
7 which they will employ socially creative identity maintenance strategies, emphasising fit alignment
8 between the sponsor and the club, or even re-categorising both parties into a superordinate group
9 based on shared or similar aspects of their image (see Blanz *et al.*, 1998). Conversely, if this threshold
10 is breached, fans cast the sponsor as a threat to ingroup consistency (Tajfel, 1982), employing
11 alternative narratives of fit that disassociate their club and, by association, themselves from 'toxic'
12 brands. Consequently, potential sponsors must be aware of the attributions fans make to particular
13 product categories and the extent to which they are prepared to accept certain naming rights sponsors
14 into their ingroup.
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31 **Additional contextual factors influencing fan reactions**

32 Beyond issues of sponsorship fit, analysis reveals three additional contextual factors that potentially
33 influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium names. These are prior involvement with the club by
34 the corporate sponsor; fans' perceived impact of the sponsorship investment; and whether the stadium
35 is new or long-established. In appraising the impact of these contextual factors, notions of gratitude
36 appear exigent, alongside previously mentioned identity maintenance strategies.
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45 *Prior involvement with the club*

46 A layer of contextual complexity is added to fans' reactions to corporate stadium renaming when
47 taking into account previous involvement with the club. With Reebok (Bolton) and Etihad
48 (Manchester City), for example, these brands first engaged in shirt sponsorship of the respective
49 teams prior to signing stadium naming rights deals. Equally, both Manchester City and Etihad are
50 owned by Abu Dhabi's ruling Al Nahyan family. Thus, it would appear that sponsors can ease the
51 path to corporate stadium name acceptance by gradually escalating the scale of their involvement
52 (sponsorship or otherwise), thereby demonstrating increasing commitment to the club. This process
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3 allows fans to reinforce the sponsor's positive aspects as a member of the ingroup (Wann and
4 Branscombe, 1995) based on synergy and even oneness with the club, rather than employing identity
5 maintenance strategies involving disassociation and resistance:
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9 "I think it's also a positive that Etihad as a sponsor is now so inextricably linked with the
10 club... Perhaps no other company in our history has been so closely linked to the club... It's a
11 brand that I associate with the City takeover and our recent resurgence as one of the most
12 successful clubs in England. The company increasing their sponsorship to include the stadium
13 and campus only further emphasises my positive view of the brand" (Manchester City fan p).
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22 This echoes aspects of *commitment and consistency* theory (Cialdini, 2009). Thus, fans who had
23 previously accepted, and even welcomed, the involvement of a corporate entity with their club (e.g. as
24 a shirt sponsor, major investor or owner), are inclined to remain consistent with this position when
25 evaluating the appropriateness of that same company, or one in the same broad product category, as a
26 stadium naming rights sponsor.
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35 Evidence from beyond this study also suggests that a sponsor's prior involvement with the club might
36 even help offset fan concerns about image/ethical fit discussed above, specifically in terms of
37 perceived negative sponsor product categories such as gambling. For example, shortly after data
38 collection took place, an announcement was made that the stadium of Stoke City Football Club (a
39 Premier League team) would be renamed after the gambling brand Bet365 (De Menezes, 2016).
40
41 Based on the insights from fans in this study, it might be expected that such a deal would elicit
42 significant resistance, yet this did not occur. Rather, this naming rights deal was reported in the press
43 as strengthening the sponsor's association with the club, reflecting the fact that the owners of Bet365
44 also own Stoke City, and that Bet365 was already the club's shirt sponsor (De Menezes, 2016). Here,
45 it seems, prior involvement with the club by Bet365 helped ameliorate any negative associations that
46 fans might hold of gambling brands as naming rights sponsors. Specifically, the stance fans adopt
47 with regard to a corporate sponsor may be affected by positions they have previously assumed
48 towards that same organisation in its relationships with their club. This illustrates not only the
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3 influence of contextual factors on fan reactions to corporate stadium naming, but also how this can
4 vary between cases; something sponsors must be cognisant of when considering pursuing stadium
5 naming rights deals.
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10 11 *Perceived impact of sponsorship investment*

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13 Prominent in all discussions with fans, both on message boards and in focus groups, was the issue of
14 money. Thus, while certain brands and product categories are perceived as carrying negative
15 connotations as potential stadium names, when faced with the reality of a sponsoring brand with a
16 potentially problematic image, fans also deploy counter-discourses, espousing a desire to distance
17 themselves from the corporate naming rights sponsor, but appreciating the importance of the financial
18 investment. These typically trade-off the corporate stadium name with the financial benefits accruing
19 to the club:
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28 “I would prefer not to be associated with a business like Sports Direct. But like people have
29 said, if they give you the money, then you take the money.” (Oldham fan i)
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35 This suggests that fans can, to some extent, rationalise acceptance of a naming rights sponsor with a
36 poor image if the financial rewards are significant enough. One Manchester City fan emphasised this
37 pragmatic approach by fans to the contemporary commercial realities of football:
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41 “...whatever it takes to get that money, do it. I’d even accept a crap name. I wouldn’t like it.
42 Don’t get me wrong. I wouldn’t like it. But if it was enough money involved, I’d accept
43 anything... It’s the way football is. You need that money” (Manchester City fan b).
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47 This echoes Woisetschläger *et al.* (2014), who suggest that the benefits received through sponsorship
48 can mitigate resistance to corporate stadium naming. The perceived financial impact of the naming
49 rights sponsorship thus emerges as a powerful contextual factor, which in this study, manifests itself
50 in contrasting ways depending on what is at stake for fans.
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57 What fans consider to be a fair financial return for the naming rights to a stadium apparently differs in
58 scale according to the current resources of their club: “you’d need to know that naming it Macron or
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3 whatever has made a significant impact to your club” (Bolton fan a). The phrase, “significant impact”
4 was referred to frequently by fans of all three clubs as constituting the ability to buy (and pay wages
5 for) players. This supports findings that team performance is the most salient dimension used by fans
6 when comparing themselves to other clubs (End *et al.*, 2002). Where fans felt that sponsorship money
7 received was insufficient to facilitate such player purchases, or might only cover the wages of
8 perceived inferior players, willingness to accept a corporate stadium name receded.
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18 Building upon the assertion that fans wish to protect their self-identity from threats presented by
19 sponsorship from negatively-viewed brands/products, further nuance is added if that sponsorship can
20 ensure the club’s survival, or at the very least prevent its relegation to a lower league. Club survival
21 could be viewed as the ultimate fair return for stadium naming rights, even if the name involved
22 constitutes a potential threat to fans’ self-identity in other ways, because without the club any nexus of
23 fans’ identity formation is lost. The fact that Oldham is a club struggling for financial survival (Frost,
24 2017) illustrates this, with sponsorship monies from Sports Direct perceived to “keep [the] club
25 going” (Oldham fan d) in a context where rumours were “going around that the players haven’t been
26 paid” (Oldham fan j):
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37 “To be quite honest with you, they can change...Boundary Park every year for the next 10
38 years and give us a million pounds for it and I’ll be over the moon..., because that will keep
39 my club going, that. That’s all I’m bothered about.” (Oldham fan d)
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43 It is therefore suggested that fans will prioritise team survival as the ultimate identity consideration,
44 leading them to justify acceptance of corporate stadium renaming where they perceive the benefit to
45 be worth the financial trade-off.
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51 However, where fans’ overriding desire to ensure club survival is facilitated by money from a source
52 they perceive to be in some way undesirable, the commitment displayed towards the sponsor is
53 tempered with a degree of reluctant acceptance. Thus, whilst Oldham fan f articulated his appreciation
54 of the sponsorship money (“Initially, I didn’t like it. But then, as soon as I saw the money involved;
55 thank you, from me personally”), there was no evidence that this reflected genuine gratitude and a
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3 willingness or obligation to reciprocate. Indeed, when asked directly whether the naming rights
4 sponsorship would affect their purchase behaviour of the sponsor brand's products, Oldham fans
5 declared it would make "no difference" (Oldham fan e). They were happy to accept the corporate
6 sponsorship money, but with no reciprocal obligation in terms of their attitudes towards or patronage
7 of the sponsor brand.
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15 By contrast, Manchester City fans displayed a willingness to use the corporate stadium name,
16 demonstrating greater gratitude for monies received: "If they're going to back us with money, the
17 least I can do is back them" (Manchester City fan b). In fact, fans' gratitude included reciprocal
18 commitment by making a conscious, active effort to consider the Etihad brand when making purchase
19 decisions. A distinction can be drawn between the outcomes of the financial investment through
20 naming rights sponsorship for Manchester City and Oldham. With the former, the scale of the
21 investment has facilitated a significant upturn in team performance, allowing the club to invest in
22 superstar players who have propelled the club to success in league and cup competitions:
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32 "Nowadays, I always call it the Etihad because finance has become crucial to our
33 development on the pitch. If a sponsor is willing to financially support the club, I'm happy to
34 publicise their name" (Manchester City fan b).
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39 Therefore, the sponsorship investment at Manchester City is regarded by fans as facilitating success.
40 This, combined with the positive image fans have of the sponsor, leads them to display their gratitude;
41 manifest in a willingness to endorse, promote and, in some cases, use the Etihad brand.
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47 Unlike Manchester City, sponsorship investment at Oldham does not seem to facilitate on-pitch
48 success, merely club survival. Where acceptance of sponsorship money is seen more as a trade-off in
49 which the benefit to the club outweighs the negative associations of the sponsor brand, fans appear to
50 demonstrate less allegiance to the naming partner. Thus, Oldham fans continue to use the Boundary
51 Park stadium name in everyday discourse, and claim no elevated purchase intentions towards
52 SportDirect.com as the sponsor brand. Hence, this naming rights deal was variously referred to by
53 Oldham fans as "money for old rope" (Oldham fan b) or "free money" (Oldham fan g).
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5 Considering Fitzgerald's (1998) definition of gratitude as comprising appreciation, a sense of
6 goodwill and a resultant disposition to act, the findings relating to Manchester City support the
7 contention that gratitude may be driven by the perceived value of the sponsorship (Kim *et al.*, 2018;
8 Tsang, 2007). However, in cases where fans might hold more negative associations of the naming
9 rights sponsor, as with Oldham, they are likely to show reluctant acceptance of the money, with no
10 real conversion of this into gratitude or feeling the necessity to reciprocate – perhaps because the
11 negative image of the sponsoring company makes it unworthy of such action.
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22 *New vs. established stadia*

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24 The cases examined in this paper represent examples of corporate naming rights sponsorship for
25 newly built (Bolton and Manchester City) and long-established (Oldham) stadia. Differences in fan
26 reactions to corporate stadium renaming for newly built versus long-established stadia have been well
27 documented (Anonymous, 2018; Crompton and Howard, 2003). Anonymous (2018) discuss how fans
28 are generally accepting of corporate names for newly built stadia not imbued with an existing name,
29 and which have not yet acquired the status of “memory places” (Boyd, 2000) where fans fondly
30 remember past footballing triumphs and experiences. This helps explain results from Vuolteenaho's *et*
31 *al's* (2018) study of 193 European football clubs, showing a higher percentage of sponsor-named
32 stadia for post-1990 venues (59.2%) than for older facilities. Similarly, for Bolton and Manchester
33 City, fans' general acceptance of the corporate names for their current stadia was – at least partially –
34 explained by the fact that both clubs had relocated to these in recent times:
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47 “I have no issues with the naming of the stadium after a sponsor as there is very little ‘history’
48 here” (Manchester City fan e).

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51 “To be honest, I didn't mind because it was a totally new stadium” (Bolton fan c).
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56 However, evidence suggests there are additional complexities to consider in terms of fans' real and
57 imagined reactions to corporate stadium (re)naming and the wider context of stadium longevity.
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3 For example, both Manchester City and Bolton fans contrasted the acceptance of corporate naming
4 rights sponsors for their current newly-built stadia with a hypothetical resistance to the renaming of
5 former long-established stadia:
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9 “I would have been passionately opposed to Maine Rd being rebranded. It had a history and
10 an identity that is extremely important to fans. A rebranding just would not have worked,
11 much like it didn't as St James's Park [Newcastle United's stadium], for the same reasons...

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15 You simply cannot rebrand a stadium which has had a name for 100 years, people are too
16 attached to it” (Manchester City fan p).

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19 “I would have been totally disgusted [had they renamed Burnden Park]. I don't think I could
20 have accepted that” (Bolton fan c).
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26 Yet even within this hypothetical realm, there was no indication from these fans that they would have
27 engaged in CORFing (Snyder *et al.*, 1986), or social mobility-based strategies for identity
28 maintenance (Doyle *et al.*, 2017), such as withdrawing their support for the club or switching
29 allegiance to another. It appears, therefore, that such hypothesising allows fans to feel as though they
30 are reasserting some power against any perceived over-commercialisation of football, permitting them
31 to enact a form of ‘safe’ resistance (albeit attitudinally), free of any negative financial or image-
32 related consequences for their club.
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43 Significantly, with both Bolton and Manchester City, the survival of neither club was particularly at
44 risk at the time of data collection, and thus fans were not faced with a wider existential threat to their
45 identities as fans. This was not the case for Oldham, where the club was in a precarious financial state,
46 as discussed earlier. This may help to explain why Oldham fans, who had witnessed the corporate
47 renaming of their long-established stadium, were keen to employ social creativity strategies, selecting
48 club survival as the primary basis for their identity maintenance, and thereby a means to justify their
49 reluctant acceptance of the corporate name.
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Conclusion

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3 This paper set out with one central research question, namely to determine the contextual factors
4 influencing fans' reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium.
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7 The findings indicate that fans articulate such reactions in terms of various dimensions of sponsorship
8 fit, which contribute towards the maintenance of their self-identity. This aligns with the work of
9 others, such as Woisetschläger *et al.* (2014). Adding to this work, it is also proposed that fans
10 prioritise some forms of fit over others, with geographical connections between corporate naming
11 sponsor and club being particularly salient in allowing fans to maintain an ingroup consistency and
12 self-identity position that supports naming rights acceptance. Where these geographical connections
13 are absent, fans appear to seek out other forms of fit relating to alignment between the values and
14 image of the corporate naming sponsor and their club, which can also facilitate acceptance of a
15 corporate stadium name; this reflects a socially creative identity maintenance strategy. Functional fit
16 is also recognised by fans, but appears to be overridden by image fit. In sum, both the different types
17 of sponsorship fit, and then how those might be prioritised, emerge within this paper as important
18 contextual factors in shaping fans' reactions to corporate stadium (re)naming. This represents the first
19 key contribution of this study.
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37 A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence
38 fans' reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium. The first of these is prior
39 involvement with a club by a sponsor. Critical to this is visible evidence or knowledge amongst the
40 fan base of a sponsor's previous substantive commitment to their club. This appears to influence
41 reactions to a corporate stadium name by reinforcing the perceived positive aspects of fit between the
42 sponsor and football club as sponsee, and mitigating any apparent negative aspects.
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51 Another additional contextual factor relates to the perceived impact of sponsorship investment on a
52 club's fortunes, whereby an apparent positive impact appears to make fans more likely to rationalise
53 or overlook aspects of poor fit that might easily threaten their self-identity. Put simply, larger and
54 more lucrative stadium naming rights deals may be more likely to reduce resistance to naming rights
55 sponsorships that have perceived poor fit with the club. Furthermore, fans' perceptions of what is 'fair
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3 financial return' from a stadium naming rights deal may vary according to the club's financial
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5 resources, with the bar being set far lower in this regard for cash-poor clubs, as is evident from the
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7 views of Oldham Athletic fans above.
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11 An additional point here relates to how fans' perceived impact of sponsorship monies from naming
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13 rights deals interacts with notions of sponsor image fit. Where such sponsorship investment is
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15 perceived to facilitate on-pitch success, and comes from a sponsor with a perceived positive image,
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17 fans appear to display genuine gratitude towards that sponsor, as was seen in the case of Manchester
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19 City fans who spoke of a greater willingness to purchase Etihad products. In contrast, where the
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21 naming rights sponsor has a perceived negative image, and where that sponsor's investment can only
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23 preserve but not necessarily enhance the club's performance and status, fans can display a more
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25 reluctant acceptance of the sponsorship and the associated stadium name. This was the case with
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27 Oldham Athletic fans, who showed little reciprocal purchase intention (and thus, little true gratitude)
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29 towards SportsDirect.com as a corporate naming rights sponsor.
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35 A third additional contextual factor influencing fans' reactions to the corporate stadium (re)naming
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37 relates to newly built versus established stadia. Specifically, findings here support existing research
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39 (Vuolteenaho *et al*, 2018), suggesting that established stadia are always likely to be a more
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41 troublesome target for naming rights deals, and consequently less likely to deliver a full range of
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43 positive outcomes for the sponsor. This is due to their status as "memory places" (Boyd, 2000) for
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45 fans. However, if a club with a long-established stadium is in a precarious financial state, then
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47 corporate renaming of the stadium may become more viable if it can deliver a perceived fair financial
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49 return that can ultimately preserve rather than threaten fans' identity by ensuring club survival. This
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51 was the case with Oldham Athletic, where the renaming of Boundary Park to SportsDirect.com Park
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53 was accepted – albeit reluctantly and without true gratitude towards the sponsor – due to the parlous
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55 state of the club's finances.
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3 Furthermore, no two sponsorships or clubs will necessarily display identical combinations of
4 contextual factors, meaning fan reactions to stadium naming rights deals may vary accordingly. On
5 the one hand, this makes it more difficult to predict fan reactions to any given stadium naming rights
6 deal. However, consistent with Firestone's (1993) concept of case-to-case translation as a form of
7 generalisability, the detailed descriptions of the cases presented will permit an evaluation of the extent
8 to which identified combinations of contextual factors are present in other cases or situations (Polit
9 and Beck, 2010), both within and outwith football. Nonetheless, the evident variability of contextual
10 factors for the cases discussed in this paper suggest that the strategic marketing communications
11 formula for naming rights sponsorships in football, and indeed sport more generally, cannot simply be
12 replicated.

23 24 25 26 **Managerial implications**

27 In terms of its managerial implications, this study identifies that sponsorship naming rights
28 negotiations need to be sensitive to the variety of contextual factors relating to local club conditions,
29 including a club's financial state, sporting performance, and the age of the stadium. Moreover, prior
30 investment by the sponsor can smooth the way to fan acceptance of a naming rights sponsorship deal.
31 This points to potential naming rights sponsors starting with smaller sponsorship assets (e.g. pitchside
32 hoardings, shirts, etc.) to weave the sponsor's presence into fans' quotidian understandings and
33 discourses. Such an approach allows the sponsor to demonstrate commitment and build familiarity,
34 trust and credibility with a club's fan base, before embarking on a significant stadium renaming deal.
35 Sponsors should also be ready to scale-up their investment in a naming rights deal in line with higher
36 club performance to deliver notions of 'fair financial return'. In addition, it would appear evident that
37 naming rights sponsors would do well to have a good awareness of their own brand image and its
38 congruency with the existing identity of the club and fan base.

39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 **Limitations and areas for future research**

57 This study has examined how various contextual factors might influence fans' reactions to corporate
58 stadium (re)naming, focusing on three football clubs based in the North West of England, all of which
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3 are contextually unique. Future research could seek to identify other forms of contextual framing
4 affecting fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorship deals, arising in, for example, the relative
5 league position of football clubs, or the landscape of professional football and associated fan bases in
6 other countries. Another contextual focus for future research is to examine how fan reactions to
7 stadium naming rights alter over time with the inevitable turnover of corporate sponsors. Specifically,
8 as we move into the second, and sometimes third, generation of corporate naming sponsors for
9 football stadia (as in the case of Bolton), there is more work to be done in examining how the fans'
10 reactions to an existing corporate naming deal for their club's stadium might be affected (negatively
11 or positively) by the perceived success of previous naming rights sponsorships. Examination of the
12 contextual factors influencing fans' reactions to corporate stadium names in other sports, beyond
13 football, is also an area of future potential research interest. Such studies could usefully build on the
14 theoretical contributions and managerial implications from this paper to help inform naming rights
15 sponsorship decision-making.

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33 Further building on the above research, another line of future potential enquiry could involve trying to
34 determine the relative importance or weighting of those different contextual factors identified as
35 influencing fan reactions to corporate stadium naming rights sponsors. For example, is there a relative
36 threshold of fair financial return on naming rights investment, above which fans are prepared to trade
37 off additional sponsorship income for higher levels of perceived fit? In addition, in the above findings
38 fan narratives of gratitude towards sponsors have been explored, highlighting differences between
39 genuine gratitude, characterised by notions of reciprocity, and more reluctant acceptance, with no
40 contingent impact on purchase intention of the sponsor brand or club-related goods and services. Field
41 studies using sales data might helpfully contribute to further advancing this perspective on differing
42 fan reactions to corporate naming rights sponsors and to sports clubs as recipients of sponsorship
43 monies. In relation to the latter, for example, could reluctant acceptance of naming rights sponsorship
44 have consequences for the club in terms of fans' match-day practices – e.g. fans' behaviour in the
45 stands, or their pre- and post-match dwell time and associated additional spending within the stadium?
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3 This study predominantly explored the views of 'local' fans (although the message board phase of the
4 research did allow for participation from a more geographically dispersed fan base). Therefore, future
5 research might look to examine differences in reactions to corporate stadium (re) naming between
6 local and more dispersed fan bases. For example, as professional sports become increasingly global in
7 their reach, will fan reactions and the narratives employed shift away from notions of geography and,
8 as such, should sponsors focus on identifying and cementing alternative bases of fit to facilitate
9 acceptance?
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Dear Reviewers,

The authors would like to thank you for your detailed and very useful comments on our paper. Where criticisms or suggestions for improvement have been made, we have detailed in the table below our response to these, indicating, where appropriate, how this has been addressed in the paper. We hope you will find our responses adequate, and thank you for your help in improving the paper further.

Reviewer	Response No.	Comment	Authors' response
AE	1	The manuscript should provide a clear distinction between extant knowledge on corporate naming and new contributions.	<p>In terms of providing a clear distinction between extant knowledge on corporate naming and new contributions, we acknowledge that the paper's contribution to theory was not articulated with enough conviction. We now do this more effectively in the introduction.</p> <p>In summary, the study initially recognises that existing dimensions of fit, as already identified in the literature (i.e. geographical, image, and functional), act as a form of context in shaping the reactions of fans to corporate stadium names. Building on this, a first contribution of the paper lies in the proposition that some forms of fit (specifically geographic fit) may be more important than others in terms of their contextual importance and influence on fans' reactions to a corporate stadium name. A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium naming rights beyond the usual dimensions of fit identified – these being prior involvement by the corporate naming sponsor with the football club, fans' perceived impact of the sponsorship investment, and whether the stadium receiving the corporate stadium name is newly built or long established. We acknowledge that the latter of these factors has been hypothesised in the literature before, but does not have any empirical support.</p>
AE	2	I expected detailed summarizing tables that identify literature gaps that are worthwhile studying.	We recognise that tabularised summaries and categorisations of relevant literature are often used in systematic literature review

			<p>papers, or those involving detailed hypotheses development. Looking back through three recent issues of EJM (Vol 53 issues 6-8), for example, we note that 6 out of 24 papers (25%) tabularise their literature in this manner, whilst the remaining 75% do not.</p> <p>In line with this 75% group of papers, we also elected not to use a tabularised literature summary in our paper. Instead, we adopted a more conventional approach to literature development. This involves building a synthesised critical interrogation of existing studies and work in the area of corporate stadium (re)naming, focusing on theoretical frameworks relating to sponsorship fit, sponsorship and gratitude, and social identity theory - all of which have relevance to the interpretation of our empirical data.</p> <p>In the introduction we also clearly summarise how gaps in this existing literature reveal a topic that is worthy of study, noting that:</p> <p><i>These existing quantitative studies provide a critical contribution to understanding fan reactions to naming rights sponsorship. However, no two sponsorships (including naming rights) are necessarily the same, and all parties in the relationship (sponsor, rights holder, fans and other stakeholders) are able to contribute towards a range of contextual factors that combine to form unique sponsorship cases. Nonetheless, Reysen et al. (2012) note the lack of any detailed examination of how context might influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium re-naming. Addressing this lacuna serves as a central motivation for this study. The paper adopts a detailed, contrasting case-based (Stake, 2005) qualitative inquiry approach. In so doing, it adds a layer of complexity to existing quantitative work, by shedding further insight on the importance of context in underpinning fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorship and the resulting explanations offered. The research is framed by one central research question:...</i></p>
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AE	3	<p>A statement in the introduction stating that qualitative work is needed because the literature has mostly taken a survey-based quantitative approach is not sufficient motivation to warrant a publication in an A-level journal.</p>	<p>We think this is probably a slight misreading of the motivation and purpose of the paper. Echoing a point made immediately above (AE response 2), we have now tweaked our introductory text to more clearly demonstrate our motivation for the paper, noting:</p> <p><i>Nonetheless, Reysen et al. (2012) note the lack of any detailed examination of how context might influence fans’ reactions to corporate stadium re-naming. Addressing this lacuna serves as a central motivation for the current study. The paper adopts a detailed, contrasting case-based (Stake, 2005) qualitative inquiry approach. In so doing, it adds a layer of complexity to existing quantitative work, by shedding further insight on the importance of context in underpinning fans’ reactions to naming rights sponsorship and the resulting explanations offered.</i></p>
AE	4	<p>Although the research questions are potentially interesting for soccer fans, the manuscript should clearly explain how answering them contributes to theory development. In developing RQ2, the study should provide specifics about contextual factors (moderators) and supporting theories.</p>	<p>Answering the first part of this criticism, there is now only one research question, which is formerly RQ2. We have shown in the introduction how this RQ arises from existing gaps within the sponsorship literature regarding context, noting that:</p> <p><i>... existing quantitative studies provide a critical contribution to understanding fan reactions to naming rights sponsorship. However, no two sponsorships (including naming rights) are necessarily the same, and all parties in the relationship (sponsor, rights holder, fans and other stakeholders) are able to contribute towards a range of contextual factors that combine to form unique sponsorship cases. Nonetheless, Reysen et al. (2012) note the lack of any detailed examination of how context might influence fans’ reactions to corporate stadium re-naming. Addressing this lacuna serves as a central motivation for this study. The paper adopts a detailed, contrasting case-based (Stake, 2005) qualitative inquiry approach. In so doing, it adds a layer of complexity to existing quantitative work, by shedding further insight on the importance of context in</i></p>

			<p><i>underpinning fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorship and the resulting explanations offered. The research is framed by one central research question: What are the contextual factors influencing fans' reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium?</i></p> <p>Further, we have now more clearly articulated the theoretical contributions of the paper in both the introduction and conclusion. Thus, the fifth paragraph of the introduction now reads thus:</p> <p><i>In addressing this question, the paper develops two key contributions. First, in line with previous studies, it is recognised that different dimensions of sponsorship fit can act as contextual factors in determining fans' reactions to corporate stadium names. However, building on this existing work, it is proposed that certain forms of fit, and thereby certain aspects of context, are more important than others in this regard. The second contribution proposes that there are additional, and previously undocumented, contextual factors beyond fit (both sponsored-property related and sponsor-related) that combine to shape fans' reactions to corporate stadium renaming. Overall, the research reveals that because contextual factors are so highly variable, there is no simple and replicable strategic marketing communications formula for the application and implementation of naming rights sponsorships in football or beyond.</i></p> <p>The first two paragraphs of the conclusion to the paper restate the two key contributions of the research in theoretical terms. In the final sentence of the conclusion we also restate how our research reveals the importance of context in naming rights sponsorship, noting:</p>
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			<p><i>...the evident variability of contextual factors for the cases discussed in this paper suggest that the strategic marketing communications formula for naming rights sponsorships in football, and indeed sport more generally, cannot simply be replicated.</i></p>
AE	5	How was generalizability addressed in the study?	<p>We acknowledge that previously no mention was made of generalizability. Therefore, consistent with the qualitative approach taken, and drawing on the work of Firestone (1993) and Polit & Beck (2010), we have added a section in the conclusion, outlining how our findings can be transferable beyond the cases presented in the paper. This section reads thus:</p> <p><i>...no two sponsorships or clubs will necessarily display identical combinations of contextual factors, meaning fan reactions to stadium naming rights deals may vary accordingly. On the one hand this makes it more difficult to predict fan reactions to any given stadium naming rights deal. However, consistent with Firestone's (1993) concept of case-to-case translation as a form of generalisability, the detailed descriptions of the cases presented will permit an evaluation of the extent to which identified combinations of contextual factors are present in other cases or situations (Polit and Beck, 2010), both within and outwith football.</i></p>
AE	6	The literature on fit is very rich. Are new dimensions of fit discovered?	<p>New dimensions of fit are not discovered, as this was not the purpose of the paper, but, as noted above, we did not make this clear enough as the paper's contribution to theory was not articulated with enough conviction. We now do this more effectively in the introduction.</p> <p>In summary, our study initially recognises that existing dimensions of fit, as already identified in the literature (i.e. geographical, image, and functional), act as a form of context in shaping the reactions of fans to corporate stadium names. Building on this, a first contribution of the paper lies in the proposition that some forms of</p>

			fit (specifically geographic fit) may be more important than others in terms of their contextual importance and influence on fans' reactions to a corporate stadium name. A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium naming rights beyond the usual dimensions of fit identified – these being prior involvement by the corporate naming sponsor with the football club, fans' perceived impact of the sponsorship investment, and whether the stadium receiving the corporate stadium name is newly built or long established. We acknowledge that the latter of these factors has been hypothesised in the literature before, but does not have any empirical support.
AE	7	The main conclusion is that “fans prioritize some forms of fit over others.” How does this finding help advance theory?	As noted in the above comment, this is not the main conclusion of the paper, but it does reflect the first contribution of our study. Key here, is the proposition that some forms of fit (specifically geographic fit) may be more important than others in terms of their contextual importance and influence on fans' reactions to a corporate stadium name. This proposition that some forms of fit may be more influential in determining fans' reactions and behaviours has not been previously identified in the sponsorship fit literature.
AE	8	Findings that a poor fit between the image of a club and values of a sponsor would render a negative reaction are expected and not novel.	We would agree with this and we do not think we make the claim that such findings are novel. The novelty of our study lies in the two key contributions outlined above.
AE	9	Please report inter-coder reliability.	We have now changed this section slightly as we did not report inter-coder reliability in a numeric sense. Our approach, was aligned with confirmability testing in qualitative research. Thus, this part of the methodology now reads thus: <i>Subsequently, recognising the importance of confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1982), the authors met and</i>

			<i>collectively reviewed, negotiated and, where appropriate, merged their independent data interpretations. This allowed for further modification of key themes to emerge as part of a final, iterative negotiation step in the analysis.</i>
R1	1	The introduction now emphasizes more clearly what the authors intend to contribute to the discipline. The research goals are more concrete, the focus on contextual factors makes sense. The findings and implications are interesting and helpful.	Thank you for these positive comments on the paper and our revisions.
R1	2	The ethics of excluding responses: I do not understand why the opinion of a “less than 16 year old” human being is excluded from an anonymous academic paper on a topic that is very unlikely to cause harm for that person. Instead, we should ask ourselves what is right in ignoring that opinion from an ethical standpoint. I just do not understand it, but hey –I live in continental Europe... A solomon-like approach (pleasing both the readers living in free countries and the people in UK ethical boards) could be to delete the statement that one child attended the group. Personally, I would prefer and strongly recommend that responsible research must not be restricted by external judgements of such arbitrary kind.	We would agree with you on much of this, but within our own Universities’ ethical guidelines using data from those under the age of 16 opens up a minefield of permission seeking and clearances which would have possibly compromised this whole project. Following your advice, and the fact that we did not use data from the child under the age of 16, we have deleted all references to this within the paper.
R1	3	Conclusions section: Statements such as “however, it is also revealed that fans prioritise...” could be expressed less absolutely – the authors explore potential context factors explaining different reactions towards naming right deals and provide some evidence for their arguments – the statement reads more like you could provide a proof. The research propositions derived from your interesting findings need to be tested (quantitatively) in the future – as suggested in the future research section.	We acknowledge this point, and the qualitative nature of our study certainly means we are unable to claim any statistical generalisability – although this was obviously not the intention. We have therefore toned down some of the verbs used in the conclusion. For example, ‘The findings demonstrate...’ now reads as ‘The findings indicate...’; and ‘However, it is also revealed...’ now reads as ‘It is therefore suggested...’.

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R1	4	<p>The variable “prior investment” seems to me to consist of two components: The length and possibly depth of past commitment to a club and the amount of financial investment. In the findings section, it is hard to differentiate those two aspects – in the conclusions section, your argument is a bit too dominantly focusing on the financial aspect (especially the statement “Put simply, larger and more lucrative stadium naming rights deals may be more likely to reduce resistance...” Larger deals are also more prominent and sponsors’ motives could be perceived as more calculative, especially in high-profile sports (e.g., as argued by Woisetschlaeger et al. 2017). I think the past commitment-argument is clearer.</p>	<p>We would agree that the key issue here is, as you put it, the “depth of past commitment to a club” by a sponsor, irrespective of the level of financial investment this may, or may not, involve. As a result we have changed the title of this section in the findings to ‘Prior involvement with the club’, and refer to involvement rather than investment at other points throughout this section. This does work much better, it emphasises that it is involvement of the sponsor, and a depth of past commitment to the club, that is important here, but it does not negate the fact that this is likely to be financial in many cases and involve investment.</p> <p>In the conclusion, part of the confusion around this issue was caused by not separating out the discussion around the contextual factors of ‘Prior involvement (previously ‘investment’) with the club’ and ‘Perceived impact of sponsorship investment’. We now do this more effectively and have rewritten paragraphs two and three of the conclusion to make things clearer. They now read thus:</p> <p><i>A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence fans’ reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team’s football stadium. The first of these is prior involvement with a club by a sponsor. Critical to this is visible evidence or knowledge amongst the fan base of a sponsor’s previous substantive commitment to their club. This appears to influence reactions to a corporate stadium name by reinforcing the perceived positive aspects of fit between the sponsor and football club as sponsee, and mitigating any apparent negative aspects.</i></p> <p><i>Another additional contextual factor relates to the perceived impact of sponsorship investment on a club’s fortunes, whereby an apparent positive impact appears to make fans more likely to rationalise or overlook aspects of poor fit that might easily threaten their self-identity. Put simply, larger and more lucrative stadium naming rights</i></p>
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			<p><i>deals may be more likely to reduce resistance to naming rights sponsorships that have perceived poor fit with the club. Furthermore, fans' perceptions of what is 'fair financial return' from a stadium naming rights deal may vary according to the club's financial resources, with the bar being set far lower in this regard for cash-poor clubs, as is evident from the views of Oldham Athletic fans above.</i></p>
R1	5	<p>I wondered about the structure of the findings section, which is divided into two main sections. While I like the content described, I just wondered why geographical fit isn't considered as a contextual variable as well, which makes the distinction between "explanation of their reactions" and "contextual variables" less clear. An alternative would be to label the section findings and use subheadings for each aspect presented.</p>	<p>We thank you for this insightful comment and we agree that fit (geographic and otherwise) constitutes an important contextual variable in this context. Therefore, we have collapsed the previous RQs into one research question (<i>What are the contextual factors influencing fans' reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium?</i>) and have restructured the findings section around the following headings: 'Contexts of sponsorship fit'; 'Additional contextual factors influencing fan reactions'. This latter section is structured around the following sub-headings: 'Prior involvement with the club'; 'Perceived impact of sponsorship investment'; and 'New vs. established stadia'. We believe that this better represents our key findings and contribution.</p>
R1	6	<p>Just an additional thought: Could the fans be more forgiving (or be more desperately demanding support) in lower vs. higher leagues? That being said, the level of professional sports might also play a role (although I realize that the third tier in the UK football is still quite professional).</p>	<p>We think this is an interesting point. There might be a difference in how fans react to stadium names according to their football club's league position, although we don't think we have enough evidence from this study to comment with any level of confidence on this matter. It is also worth considering that league position may be a surrogate masking other factors, such as the financial viability of clubs; for example lower league clubs might be more financially stretched and hence fans more accepting of naming rights sponsors and the injection of cash they promise. Ultimately, this seems like an area for possible future research, and as a result we have added the following text to the final 'Limitations and areas for future research' section of the paper:</p>

			<p><i>Future research could seek to identify other forms of contextual framing affecting fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorship deals, arising in, for example, the relative league position of football clubs, or the landscape of professional football and associated fan bases in other countries.</i></p>
R1	7	<p>Table 1: I would prefer a table that shows the characteristics of each individual and maybe some more descriptions than just age and gender (such as an assessment of their level of fan identification, and anything else that is a "purposeful" sampling criterion).</p>	<p>As noted in the paper, the basis of the purposive selection for the focus group was 'fans with a high level of attachment to the clubs'. This was reflected in the fact that participants were recruited from 'message board and social media, though supporters' associations, and from researchers' personal contacts'. In an icebreaker question to the focus groups, we asked participants to introduce themselves and detail their attachment to the club. All identified themselves as highly attached and committed fans, typically illustrating this by commenting on their many years of support for the club, or childhood memories of visiting the club with a parent or grandparent, along with the fact that in most cases participants were season ticket holders. However, we did not pursue these individual lines of enquiry in a manner that would allow for the construction of table detailing each participant's characteristics and their levels of fan identification. The consistent and comparable collection of such an individualised-level of information would have required a shift towards a systematic, one-on-one interviewing approach within the focus group context. This is not considered good practice in focus group moderation. As Bryman and Bell (2003) indicate, the focus group practitioner should focus on "the ways in which individuals discuss a certain issue as members of a <i>group</i>, rather than simply as individuals."</p> <p>Beyond this, separating out age and gender for each participant was not particularly helpful, because, as already mentioned in the paper: "No evidence was found for the effect of any demographic variables (e.g. gender, age) on responses given." Furthermore, whilst some participants revealed their exact age when introducing themselves</p>

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			to others in their focus group, some simply indicated they were in a particular age group (e.g. in their 50s), or revealed their approximate age through stories of how long they had supported the club.
R1	8	In the introduction (second paragraph), the second part of the last sentence (suggesting that...) is not logically tied to the first part.	<p>We agree that the second part of this sentence seems disconnected. As a result we have deleted the first part of the sentence, and made the second part a sentence in its own right. As a result, the final two sentences of this paragraph now read thus:</p> <p><i>In response, fans took direct action, painting the original name on the stadium’s perimeter wall (BBC, 2012); and by 2013, the old name was reinstated (Edwards, 2012), suggesting that fan reactions to corporate stadium names are an important element in their potential as sponsorship vehicles.</i></p>
R1	9	Spelling of Haselhoff in the second paragraph just before the heading “sponsorship fit and gratitude” (unfortunately, the manuscript doesn’t have page numbers).	Thank you for drawing our attention to this. We have now amended this to the correct spelling of Haselhoff.
R1	10	In the section “Fans’ explanations...”, fourth paragraph: the last sentence with the idea for future research should be placed at the end of the paper in the limitations and future research section.	<p>Upon closer inspection, this area for future research was also identified in the “Limitations and areas for future research” section of our paper. As such, we have removed it from the earlier section. The text under “Limitations and areas for future research” reads thus:</p> <p><i>This study predominantly explored the views of ‘local’ fans (although the message board phase of the research did allow for participation from a more geographically dispersed fan base). Therefore, future research might look to examine differences in reactions to corporate stadium (re) naming between local and more dispersed fan bases. For example, as professional sports become increasingly global in their reach, will fan reactions and the narratives employed shift away from notions of geography and, as such, should sponsors focus on</i></p>

			<i>identifying and cementing alternative bases of fit to facilitate acceptance?</i>
R1	11	Contextual factors section: Here I wondered if the number of renaming a stadium could be also a contextual factor. Fans might blame the first sponsor, negative effects might be less pronounced in a second or third renaming.	<p>We would agree wholeheartedly that multiple corporate renamings of the same stadium may in themselves act as a contextual factor in fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorships. In our study this situation only really concerned one club (Bolton). In this case, reactions to both corporate names (Reebok and Macron) were generally positive and our data did not pick up on a huge amount of interplay between one and the other, although there was perhaps a positive halo effect from the club's success under the Reebok sponsorship which transmitted onto the Macron stadium naming. Overall, we felt this was a fruitful area for future research. As a result we have added the following text to the first paragraph of the final section of the paper, entitled 'Limitations and areas for future research'. This addition reads thus:</p> <p><i>Another contextual focus for future research is to examine how fan reactions to stadium naming rights alter over time with the inevitable turnover of corporate sponsors. Specifically, as we move into the second, and sometimes third, generation of corporate naming sponsors for football stadia (as in the case of Bolton), there is more work to be done in examining how the fans' reactions to an existing corporate naming deal for their club's stadium might be affected (negatively or positively) by the perceived success of previous naming rights sponsorships.</i></p>
R2	1	I enjoyed reading the revised version of the manuscript! In my opinion the authors did a great job of integrating the guidance given by the AE with the reviewer comments.	Thank you for your supportive comments on the revised manuscript.
R2	2	Is it really necessary to have the same quote from the same fan (Manchester City fan p) twice (on p.18 and on p.21)?	Thank you for noticing this. It is something we did not intend. We have now substituted the second repeat quote from Manchester City fan p with an alternative quote from Manchester City fan b,

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			<p>which we believe illustrates the point being made just as well. This new quote reads thus:</p> <p><i>“Nowadays, I always call it the Etihad because finance has become crucial to our development on the pitch. If a sponsor is willing to financially support the club, I’m happy to publicise their name” (Manchester City fan b).</i></p>
R2	3	Is it possible to make the case for the acceptance of Bet365 by Stoke City fans (p.19) a bit stronger?	<p>As requested, we have reworded this section to make the claim a bit stronger. The section now reads as follows:</p> <p><i>Evidence from beyond this study also suggests that a sponsor’s prior involvement with the club might even help offset fan concerns about image/ethical fit discussed above, specifically in terms of perceived negative sponsor product categories such as gambling. For example, shortly after data collection took place, an announcement was made that the stadium of Stoke City Football Club (a Premier League team) would be renamed after the gambling brand Bet365 (De Menezes, 2016). Based on the insights from fans in this study, it might be expected that such a deal would elicit significant resistance, yet this did not occur. Rather, this naming rights deal was reported in the press as strengthening the sponsor’s association with the club, reflecting the fact that the owners of Bet365 also own Stoke City, and that Bet365 was already the club’s shirt sponsor (De Menezes, 2016). Here, it seems, prior involvement with the club by Bet365 helped ameliorate any negative associations that fans might hold of gambling brands as naming rights sponsors. Specifically, the stance fans adopt with regard to a corporate sponsor may be affected by positions they have previously assumed towards that same organisation in its relationships with their club.</i></p>
RE	1	There is a need to provide a more convincing motivation for your study (please see the AE concerns on this). In	<p>We acknowledge that the paper’s contribution to theory was not articulated with enough conviction. We now do this more effectively in the introduction.</p>

		<p>developing this motivation more clearly, this would help with establishing the contribution that you make.</p>	<p>In summary, the study initially recognises that existing dimensions of fit, as already identified in the literature (i.e. geographical, image, and functional), act as a form of context in shaping the reactions of fans to corporate stadium names. Building on this, a first contribution of the paper lies in the proposition that some forms of fit (specifically geographic fit) may be more important than others in terms of their contextual importance and influence on fans' reactions to a corporate stadium name. A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium naming rights beyond the usual dimensions of fit identified – these being prior involvement by the corporate naming sponsor with the football club, fans' perceived impact of the sponsorship investment, and whether the stadium receiving the corporate stadium name is newly built or long established. We acknowledge that the latter of these factors has been hypothesised in the literature before, but does not have any empirical support.</p>
RE	2	<p>There is some doubt regarding your contribution to theory (AE) and the specific mechanisms that you identify (AE). I can see the point that the AE makes. In your introduction (paragraphs 3 and 4) offer a somewhat disjointed rationale. The argument that you offer is almost too specific, that is, it focuses on what single papers do or do not contribute. You need to add an additional layer to this that explains how current knowledge is not sufficient (rather than how single pieces of work are deficient). For example, as a reader I do not a compelling sense of the need for understanding contextual issues or what the complexity that you refer to actually is or offers.</p>	<p>Both of the reviewers commented positively on the paper's contribution. In particular, R1 commented:</p> <p><i>The introduction now emphasizes more clearly what the authors intend to contribute to the discipline. The research goals are more concrete, the focus on contextual factors makes sense. The findings and implications are interesting and helpful.</i></p> <p>Despite these positive comments, we have more clearly articulated the theoretical contributions of the paper in both the introduction and conclusion. Thus, the fifth paragraph of the introduction now reads thus:</p>

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			<p><i>In addressing this question, the paper develops two key contributions. First, in line with previous studies, it is recognised that different dimensions of sponsorship fit can act as contextual factors in determining fans’ reactions to corporate stadium names. However, building on this existing work, it is proposed that certain forms of fit, and thereby certain aspects of context, are more important than others in this regard. The second contribution proposes that there are additional, and previously undocumented, contextual factors beyond fit (both sponsored-property related and sponsor-related) that combine to shape fans’ reactions to corporate stadium renaming. Overall, the research reveals that because contextual factors are so highly variable, there is no simple and replicable strategic marketing communications formula for the application and implementation of naming rights sponsorships in football or beyond.</i></p> <p>The final sentence of this paragraph really drives home why context matters in naming rights sponsorship.</p> <p>The first two paragraphs of the conclusion to the paper restate the two key contributions of the research in theoretical terms. In the final sentence of the conclusion we also restate how our research reveals the importance of context in naming rights sponsorship, noting:</p> <p><i>...the evident variability of contextual factors for the cases discussed in this paper suggest that the strategic marketing communications formula for naming rights sponsorships in football, and indeed sport more generally, cannot simply be replicated.</i></p> <p>We also focus on the managerial implications of the research at the end of the paper, emphasising how:</p>
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			<p>...sponsorship naming rights negotiations need to be sensitive to the variety of contextual factors relating to local club conditions, including a club's financial state, sporting performance, and the age of the stadium.</p>
RE	3	<p>Rather than presenting the RQs – I would instead focus in the introduction on developing your contributions, which are stated in paragraph 5. That is, I would like to see more justification in the introduction for the fit-based approach (and its value) and the contextual factors (and their value) – actually I find the presentation of your RQs unhelpful.</p>	<p>No concerns were raised by the AE or the reviewers with regards to the research questions and indeed both of the reviewers commented positively on the introduction, research goals and contribution. In particular, R1 commented:</p> <p><i>The introduction now emphasizes more clearly what the authors intend to contribute to the discipline. The research goals are more concrete, the focus on contextual factors makes sense. The findings and implications are interesting and helpful.</i></p> <p>Therefore, we have made the decision to continue with research questions. However, in light of feedback from R1 around fit being a contextual variable, we have collapsed the RQs into one overall RQ, which reads thus:</p> <p><i>What are the contextual factors influencing fans' reactions to the corporate (re) naming of their team's football stadium?</i></p> <p>This RQ then guides our analysis and discussion, surfacing the two main contributions of our study.</p> <p>We do acknowledge that the paper's contribution was not explained with as much conviction as it could have been. Therefore, we have re-written the introduction to more clearly articulate the contribution and importance of the study.</p>
RE	4	<p>I appreciate that this is a qualitative piece of work, but it still requires more solid grounding in extant knowledge. In that regard, please provide some rationale in the introduction for the underpinning theories that you draw</p>	<p>We believe the paper now provides a clear understanding, throughout, of what it is adding to extant knowledge and theory in the field of sponsorship, and specifically naming rights sponsorship.</p>

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		<p>upon in the literature review later on. What I am asking is: what role did theory play in your work?</p>	<p>In this regard, we set our position out very clearly in the introduction:</p> <p><i>...existing quantitative studies provide a critical contribution to understanding fan reactions to naming rights sponsorship. However, no two sponsorships (including naming rights) are necessarily the same, and all parties in the relationship (sponsor, rights holder, fans and other stakeholders) are able to contribute towards a range of contextual factors that combine to form unique sponsorship cases. Nonetheless, Reysen et al. (2012) note the lack of any detailed examination of how context might influence fans' reactions to corporate stadium re-naming. Addressing this lacuna serves as a central motivation for this study. The paper adopts a detailed, contrasting case-based (Stake, 2005) qualitative inquiry approach. In so doing, it adds a layer of complexity to existing quantitative work, by shedding further insight on the importance of context in underpinning fans' reactions to naming rights sponsorship and the resulting explanations offered.</i></p>
RE	5	<p>In line with my comments regarding setting up a better foundation for your work – I would also like to see here a more explicit explanation of your analysis in the method section. In particular, template analysis implies that your analysis was initially based on a tentative framework. If this is the case, what was that and how was it derived. In explaining this, you have the opportunity to make a better connection between extant knowledge and the contribution that you make.</p>	<p>There was no initial framework prior to the data analysis beginning, merely the broad backdrop of our central research question. Put otherwise, we took a largely inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge from our data, rather than starting with a tentative understanding of what those themes might be. Whilst it is entirely legitimate for template analysis to take this more inductive approach, with the first cut of themes being derived from the data, we do wonder whether the term 'template' itself may confuse some readers into thinking that our approach was more deductive. For this reason, we have reworded the section on our data analysis so it reads thus:</p> <p><i>Against the broad backdrop of the central research question (i.e. determining what contextual factors might influence fans' reactions</i></p>

			<p><i>to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium), the researchers undertook an inductive and iterative form of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved building up an initial set of themes after coding the message board data and then reorganising, revising and modifying them following the coding of focus group data and field notes. Emphasising a need for quality and reflexivity checks, the process was initially undertaken independently by each researcher. Subsequently, recognising the importance of confirmability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1982), the authors met and collectively reviewed, negotiated and, where appropriate, merged their independent data interpretations. This allowed for further modification of key themes to emerge as part of a final, iterative negotiation step in the analysis.</i></p>
RE	6	<p>When I read your results, I am more convinced that the use of RQs actually limits your analysis – in that it lacks maturity. Developing your contributions better in the first part of the manuscript would certainly help here for you to provide a more mature analysis. For example, when reading the findings under RQ1 – you dive straight into the fit narratives – but the reader cannot understand how this came about from the current descriptions of your analysis and from the underdeveloped contribution statement. Are you saying that you expected fit-based narratives and that you accept this as a valid approach to understanding fans' perspectives? If so, then you certainly need to establish this better in the introduction and also in your analysis explanation. You have in effect answered your own RQ1 before collecting the data – indicating that there is already a more established base of knowledge. I have chosen RQ1 as an example – but similar comments can be applied to RQ2. So consider carefully how you can more coherently link to extant knowledge, how this informed your theoretical framing</p>	<p>RQ1 has been removed from the paper, so the criticisms relating to this question are not really relevant anymore.</p> <p>In terms of the contribution statement within the paper, we have addressed criticisms regarding the underdeveloped nature of this in RE response 2 above.</p>

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		for the analysis, how the analysis was explicitly conducted, and then the presentation of your findings. Doing so will really help you in framing your contributions (both at the front-end and also in the conclusion).	
RE	7	Actually, I think that you could provide a table that shows the emergent/template themes plus illustrative quotes.	<p>We recognise that tabularised summaries of findings from template analysis are sometimes employed in the reporting of research. Looking back through four recent issues of EJM (Vol 53 issues 8-11), for example, we note that only 3 out of 15 qualitative or mixed methods papers (20%) tabularise their identified themes with illustrative quotes, whilst the remaining 80% do not.</p> <p>In line with this 80% group of papers, we also elected not to use a tabularised reporting of themes in our paper. Instead, we adopted a more conventional, narrative approach to reporting our findings. This involves presenting an evolving narrative of findings, which prioritises the voice of participants, and interpreting these with reference to relevant theories in order to address the research question.</p>
RE	8	R1 raises some important considerations regarding the reporting of your data. Please consider these comments and provide your rationale for including or not including the participant identified by the reviewer.	<p>We would agree with R1 on much of their point regarding reporting the data of the respondent aged under 16. However, within our own Universities' ethical guidelines, using data from those under the age of 16 opens up a minefield of permission seeking and clearances which would have possibly compromised this whole project. Following the advice of R1, and the fact that we did not use data from the child under the age of 16, we have deleted all references to this within the paper.</p>
RE	9	R1 raises from concerns regarding your claims – do consider their comments and revise the manuscript accordingly. Please also see my comments on the coherency of your narrative throughout.	<p>We acknowledge R1's point regarding some of our claims in the conclusion. Thus, we have toned down some of the verbs used in the conclusion. For example, 'The findings demonstrate...' now reads as 'The findings indicate...'; and 'However, it is also revealed...' now reads as 'It is therefore suggested...'.</p>

			<p>We have also taken on board R1's comments regarding the "depth of past commitment to a club" by a sponsor, irrespective of the level of financial investment this may, or may not, involve. As a result we have changed the title of the relevant section in the findings to 'Prior involvement with the club', and refer to involvement rather than investment at other points throughout this section. We feel this works much better, as it emphasises that it is involvement of the sponsor, and a depth of past commitment to the club, that is important here, but it does not negate the fact that this is likely to be financial in many cases and involve investment. To further aid comprehension of this point, we have rewritten paragraphs two and three of the conclusion to make things clearer by separating out the discussion around the contextual factors of 'Prior involvement (previously 'investment') with the club' and 'Perceived impact of sponsorship investment'. They now read thus:</p> <p><i>A second contribution is the surfacing of three additional contextual factors that may further influence fans' reactions to the corporate (re)naming of their team's football stadium. The first of these is prior involvement with a club by a sponsor. Critical to this is visible evidence or knowledge amongst the fan base of a sponsor's previous substantive commitment to their club. This appears to influence reactions to a corporate stadium name by reinforcing the perceived positive aspects of fit between the sponsor and football club as sponsee, and mitigating any apparent negative aspects.</i></p> <p><i>Another additional contextual factor relates to the perceived impact of sponsorship investment on a club's fortunes, whereby an apparent positive impact appears to make fans more likely to rationalise or overlook aspects of poor fit that might easily threaten their self-identity. Put simply, larger and more lucrative stadium naming rights deals may be more likely to reduce resistance to naming rights sponsorships that have perceived poor fit with the club. Furthermore,</i></p>
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			<p><i>fans' perceptions of what is 'fair financial return' from a stadium naming rights deal may vary according to the club's financial resources, with the bar being set far lower in this regard for cash-poor clubs, as is evident from the views of Oldham Athletic fans above.</i></p> <p>We believe these changes have enhanced the coherence of the narrative throughout the different sections of our paper.</p>
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