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“This Venue Is Brought to You by...”: The Diffusion of Sports and Entertainment Facility Name Sponsorship in Urban Europe

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Abstract

Drawing on a database of 193 football (soccer) grounds and 115 indoor arenas, as well as press releases and media reports associated with them, this study charts the diffusion of sporting and entertainment facility name sponsorship across metropolises, cities, towns, and smaller settlements in six European contexts. Our results show the emergence of naming rights deals in the 1990s, their peak in the mid-2000s, and the current situation with a steadier growth of name sponsorship. Thus far, the corporate re-branding of venues has remained less prevalent in Italy, Norway, and Scotland than in England and Wales, Finland, and above all Germany. In financing newly built venues, however, the corporatized landmark language in focus has become a practically invariable part of local growth, austerity and (re)branding policies. Despite voices of resistance in all regions studied here, pressure towards the corporate renaming of even hereditary, communally endorsed football stadiums is increasingly being felt by municipal and private-sector venue owners.

Keywords: naming rights, event-led urban development, football stadiums, indoor arenas, Europe

Introduction

In *Ethics, Money and Sport*, Walsh and Giulianotti write that contemporary sporting venue and competition naming rights herald “a revolutionary attitude towards nomenclature almost as radical as the Bolshevik renaming of the ancient city of St Petersburg, or the Khmer Rouge’s re-titling of city streets in Cambodia” (2007, p. 2). Recent decades have witnessed an unprecedented surge in venue naming and name-changing exercises for commercial ends, starting in cities of the United States, and subsequently spreading to practically all urbanized parts of the globe (see more generally on the commodification of urban place naming: Light & Young, 2014; Medway & Warnaby, 2014; Rose-Redwood, 2011; Vuolteenaho & Ainiala, 2009).

Across Europe, too, an increasing number of sporting and entertainment facilities (and, more recently, other types of principally “public” urban infrastructures) have become stages for this “innovative” revenue-generating strategy. Naming rights have been sold for many hundreds of European venues, whether by local councils with shrinking finances, or by private teams and corporations attempting to stay competitive. Nevertheless, comparative analyses portraying and

attempting to explain this phenomenon on a continental or sub-continental scale have remained rare to say the least (for a partial exception, see Bezold, 2013). This article will, therefore, seek to explore the diffusion of naming rights sponsorship across a set of European national contexts with variably resource-rich sporting leagues and different venue infrastructures. By combining quantitative and qualitative comparative methodologies, we will ask what kinds of diachronic trends and explanatory factors (for instance in terms of city size and venue capacity), as well as manifestations of neoliberal urbanism and civic opposition, have characterized the adoption of venue name sponsorship in England and Wales, Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Scotland (see a detailed list of research questions in the methodology section below). In particular, the focus will be on the extent to which this business-oriented toponymic alternative has been implemented at football (or soccer, the biggest spectator sport by far in most European national contexts) grounds, and with indoor sporting and entertainment venues.

To bolster our empirical mapping of this largely uncharted terrain, in the following theoretical section we will contextualize the new urban “landmark language” (Viljamaa-Laakso, 1999) in question as an aspect of the neoliberal city, generally characterized by a heightened entrepreneurial ethos, place-marketing initiatives and proactiveness in capturing globally mobile investment flows. Often implemented in connection with one-off or continual sporting events, venue naming rights deals represent a particular type of sponsorship that has had its recent popularity boosted by a decline in public financing in the context of urban austerity. Meanwhile, acts of selling venue naming rights facilitate commodification-led tendencies of cultural-linguistic globalization and (pseudo-)anglicization, public-private partnership arrangements, and arguably also new types of transurban connectivities in terms of learning profit-driven policies. While expected gains in return for naming rights deals range from image enhancement and new revenue streams to increased investment prospects, earlier studies have indicated that levels of acceptance for the sale of naming rights have tended to vary considerably among locals, and especially fans. In Europe, football venue naming rights deals, in particular, have not infrequently faced “traditionalist” opposition (e.g. Church & Penny, 2013; Woisetschläger, Haselhoff, & Backhaus, 2014). Next, we analyze a database of over 300 football grounds and indoor arenas, firstly through nation-specific overviews and exemplifying vignettes, illuminating trajectories, peaks and other characteristics in how the naming rights phenomenon has spread in these settings. In the synthesis that follows the nation-specific snapshots, we highlight general European trends and local- and

national-scale peculiarities in the (non-)diffusion of this particular form of commodification of urban space. In conclusion, we propose future research directions for urban place-name studies suggested by our findings.

A remedy for event cities in financial straits? Conceptualizing venue name sponsorship as a corporatized landmark language

The recent surge in naming rights deals can be seen as a particular “cultural” aspect in the world-wide mobilization of entrepreneurial discourses, as well as a dimension of event-led urbanization aimed at encouraging inward investment and facilitating the rebranding of cities and their landmark infrastructures (on entrepreneurial urbanism and event-led urban growth and branding policies, see e.g. Broudehoux, 2017; Gratton, Shibli, & Coleman, 2005; Harvey, 1989; Lauermann, 2016; Smith, 2016). In neoliberal event cities where spaces such as football stadiums and multi-purpose indoor arenas are perceived as key catalysts of urban growth, the financial and promotional “gravity” of urban place and event names has been increasingly recognized by transnational mobile capital and local policy-makers alike. While the consequent interest in selling naming rights is certainly not restricted to sports facilities, sport sponsorship has long been a realm where enormous sums of money circulate annually. In these markets, locally influential growth coalitions and marketing partnerships have emerged, weaving city-specific webs between corporations and sports teams, developers, investment companies and local authorities.

Globally, the impact of sponsorship on urban redevelopment has been most commonly analyzed in relation to the bidding, planning, implementation, and aftermath of the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup and UEFA European Championship tournaments as well as other one-off urban mega-events (e.g. Broudehoux, 2017; Klauser, 2011). In the United States, by contrast, sport-associated regeneration strategies have normally focused on facilities built predominantly for domestic spectator sports (Gratton, Shibli, & Coleman, 2005). Importantly in this regard, Giulianotti (2011) has noted that it is not only major international events hosted in state-of-the-art arenas of world-class metropolises, but also “more time-space diffuse sporting occasions” (p. 3294) associated with domestic tournaments (such as the English Premier League) that influence economic and social fortunes in the cities of North America, Europe and beyond. Indeed, it is not

only stadiums of worldwide repute, with veritable potential for mobilizing sponsorships with select world-class corporations, that have been subject to corporate name sponsorship in recent decades (Bezold, 2013; Herstein & Berger, 2013).

From a transurban interconnectivity or diffusion perspective, critical theorists from Harvey (1989) to Klingmann (2007) have labeled the “serial repetition” of successful redevelopment and marketing models as a hallmark of contemporary entrepreneurial urbanism. The iterative practices of neoliberal urban reforms cover the creative borrowing of architectural-stylistic fashions, implementing redevelopment solutions, commodified standardization of many urban symbolic forms, and privileging the use in urban branding of select “world languages,” especially English as the globally hegemonic lingua franca of business. Instances of such linguistic landscape transformations, with urban spaces increasingly (re)signified through “immediately recognizable” designations, can be seen across continental Europe, and elsewhere, as typified by Yurchak’s (2000) semiotic reading of toponymic “westernization” in post-Soviet Russia. Similarly, Vuolteenaho and Kolamo (2012) have explored the blossoming of “overworked globalisms” in Finnish urban settlements, arguing that these “extroverted” and “spectacular” urban nomenclatures form a “semi-hegemonic” trend across the country’s leisurescapes. Elsewhere in Europe too, many recent sales of naming rights have led to the proliferation of urban place names that often have “nothing whatsoever to do with local geographical circumstances” (Viljamaa-Laakso, 1999, p. 82; Vuolteenaho & Ainiala, 2009).

Besides such cultural-linguistic borrowing eroding the heritage-bearing function of urban names, the surging sales of urban naming rights mirror the recent intensification in transurban “policy mobilities” (see e.g. McCann, 2013; Peck & Theodore, 2010). The procedural sharing of “best practices” in sporting venue and other spatial naming rights is spreading, although this type of “transurban interconnectivity” (Giulianotti, 2011) is largely overlooked or only tangentially tackled in theoretical urban literature. Contemporarily, web portals (e.g. <http://www.uksponsorship.com>) efficiently deliver information about sport-, culture- and education-related sponsorship opportunities, while marketing consultancy firms laud their expertise in tailoring mutually beneficial contracts, providing bold instructions to stakeholders. According to SponsorPitch (2011), for instance, sponsors are guided to stick to short venue names (“the return on investment in terms of media impressions alone will be enormous” if this rule is

followed), eschew renaming existing stadiums with heritage, and seek long-term contracts which show their commitment and hence help to gain the admiration and respect of fans and the media.

When seen as a distinct marketing communication method, sponsorship refers to a strategically planned way of donating resources, carried out in a way that is mutually beneficial to both sponsor and sponsee (Demir & Söderman, 2015). In the case of sporting and entertainment venues, the acquisition of naming rights usually translates into the sponsor's increased visibility among targeted audiences, especially through the new place brand's recurring evocations in the digital sphere and at the venue itself. Local venue owners may likewise benefit from the repute of the corporate brand after which their "homes" are named but, above all, they gain revenue in return for sold venue names. By supplementing owners' (or tenants') income streams from ticket and merchandise sales, in-stadium and kit advertising, hospitality services and the like, venue name sponsorship amounts to "a maximization of the economic utility of stadium space" (Gaffney, 2008, p. 205). Moreover, with the gradual institutionalization of corporatized urban place-naming practices, many publicly owned sporting venues have been also made accessible to naming rights deals. All this has increased the importance of name sponsorship in financing redevelopment projects in neoliberal event cities.

In this article, venue name sponsorship is conceptualized as a comparatively novel yet contested and potentially risky method of garnering revenue. In European cities and towns of different sizes and economic circumstances, local actors with varying economic clout have resorted to this funding source. Arguably, this tendency has been accelerated the contemporary urban context of austerity policies and declining public subsidies (Schönig & Schipper, 2016), along with the simultaneous threat of bankruptcy hanging over many European sporting teams (see Kennedy & Kennedy, 2012). This article's empirical analyses will, however, demonstrate that not all recently built or renovated venues have become name-sealed hubs of brand alliances in Europe. In certain national contexts mapped below, recalcitrance towards the selling of naming rights at older venues has remained the rule rather than the exception. While the attachment felt by fans to stadium names is not dissimilar to the notion of toponymic attachment elaborated by Kostanski (2009), it is also notable that a number of owners of "stadiums with heritage" have learnt to value their inherited names as community assets, at least for the time being. This notion applies particularly to European football, a game paradoxically known both for its heavyweight commercialism and as a realm of sometimes enthusiastically traditionalist fan cultures in which a nostalgic drive toward

the “moral economy of space and community” reigns supreme (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2010, p. 567; see also Bale, 2000; Bouchet, Hillairet, & Bodet, 2013; Hognestad, 2015; cf. in North America: Gerke, 2017).

Methodology

As Bezold (2013) notes, very limited empirical work has been thus far published on the European venue name sponsorship market. Apart from largely inaccessible marketing research and existing annual listings of top and select smaller venues with sponsored names, to our knowledge no prior systematic quantitative comparative studies exist on this topic in human geographic or urban studies literature, which is somewhat surprising given the recent prevalence of this phenomenon. That said, in order to start charting and explaining the geographical diffusion of naming rights, the new phenomenon’s dynamic and fuzzy nature must be acknowledged, as several economic, business-specific (or sport-specific) and cultural factors can influence the adoption (or lack) of venue name sponsorship in specific urban and national settings.

For this study, we opted to compare the type of toponymic (re)branding under investigation from two overlapping perspectives. Firstly, to mirror the heterogeneity of economic, demographic, policy-related and cultural circumstances prevailing in European professional sports, we were keen to compare the diffusion of naming rights through a sample of geographical settings from continental, insular, and Nordic contexts, including some known for their world-leading national leagues, and others with less commodified leagues and less global media attention. To obtain an adequately rich sample, we chose to conduct the study in England and Wales (studying both countries together due to their integrated top football leagues), Finland, Germany, Italy, Norway, and Scotland. Secondly, we took a cue from Crawford’s (2004, pp. 80–81) division between football, as a sport where venues regularly display a high degree of tradition-awareness, and “newer” organized sports that “have been successfully stripped of their (relatively) little history and sold as easily accessible entertainment events.” By comparing football grounds with indoor event arenas (more commonly also used for non-sport occasions and show-business), we thus aimed at a corpus reflecting differences in the propensity of adopting market-led changes and trading off tradition in favor of corporate toponymy.

In each case, we collected a subset of data comprised of the home football grounds of the clubs in the top two national leagues in the 2016–17 season (or the 2017 season in Finland and Norway), as well as the national football stadium (where applicable). Football-related data were then supplemented by available statistics on the 15 to 20 largest indoor arenas—at least occasionally used for sporting events—in each geographical context by spectator capacity.

In operationalizing the explorative statistical objectives of this research, we settled on four dependent variables intended to measure the propensity for naming rights in the respective countries and localities:

- Venues currently with a sponsored name or a non-sport corporate owner's name (yes/no);
- Venues that have had a sponsored name or a non-sport corporate venue owner's name (yes/no);
- The year of each venue's first naming rights contract (where applicable);
- The number of separate naming rights deals per venue.

In terms of available independent variables explaining the diffusion of name sponsorship, it often proved difficult to obtain adequate and consistent information about some potentially useful characteristics of venues and naming rights deals. For instance, information on the monetary sums involved in naming rights deals, or on venues' public/private ownership patterns, were not always publicly traceable, being often seen as commercially sensitive. Measuring and categorizing the linguistic-semantic features of the venue names or the effects of venues' intra-urban locations on the incidence of naming rights in an adequately rigid fashion are other tasks that fell outwith the scope of this study, but which offer much scope for future work. However, for nearly all of the 308 sporting venues included in the dataset, we were able to trace systematically the facilities' original year of construction, the business sector of venue name sponsors, and three other independent variables measuring their size and status:

- Capacity (maximum spectators for sporting events);
- Local urban population;
- Key tenant's position in the hierarchy of national leagues (first league / second or

lower league / no key tenant).

The analysis involved two phases, intended to answer two sets of research questions. In the first phase, the focus was on basic statistical analyses (frequencies, measures, cross-tabulations and chi square tests) of the aforementioned variables. On the basis of the collected statistical data, we asked:

1) How do different independent variables explain the adoption and non-adoption of naming rights deals in these European countries? For instance, what types of venues have been national trend-setters, or more adverse to entering such deals?

In the second phase we adopted a more qualitative approach. We interpreted our results through a broader lens of statistical data, content analyses of associated media sources, and dialogues with theoretical literature, aiming to answer the following research questions:

2) How are the commodification-related processes and realities of globalization, revenue-generation and austerity reflected in the European data?

3) What kinds of diachronic trends and peaks as well as learning procedures have characterized the spread of name sponsorship in Europe?

4) How prevalent is resistance to name sponsorship in Europe, and what kinds of factors explain these critical public responses?

National snapshots of venue naming rights

England and Wales

In our English and Welsh data, 15 football grounds (33.3%) and 13 indoor arenas (65.0%) have at some point had names related to non-sports corporations and brands (see Table 1). The current

figures are moderately lower: 26.7% and 55.0% respectively, indicating a weaker counter-trend away from the sale of naming rights.

In our sample, a limited number of naming rights deals were already made in the 1990s. Symptomatic of the turbulence of sports and entertainment businesses in these countries, the five deals made before 2000 were short-lived, with three of these venues having changed names twice to date. The pioneering facility in football was in Huddersfield: the *McAlpine Stadium* (1994–2004), later renamed the *Galpharm Stadium* (2004–12) and the *John Smith's Stadium* (2012–). The earliest sponsored name for an indoor arena was *NYNEX Arena* (1995–98), subsequently re-baptized as the *Manchester Evening News Arena* (1998–2011) before turning to its current non-corporate name *Manchester Arena*, with an interlude when it was known as the *Phones 4u Arena* (2013–15).

Still, the first real boom in venue name sponsorship in England and Wales began in the 2000s, when six indoor arenas and eight football grounds were branded after non-sports corporate sponsors, as exemplified by *Echo Arena Liverpool* and Leicester City's *Walkers Stadium* (since 2011 the *King Power Stadium*), both built on former industrial sites. At the upper end of the economic spectrum, in 2004, a Dubai-based airline committed to pay Arsenal F.C. £100 million for eight years of shirt sponsorship and fifteen years of naming rights for what would become the *Emirates Stadium* ("Arsenal name new ground," 2004).¹ This then record-breaking sum represented one of the first such deals for a true European mega-venue, along with the *Allianz Arena* in Munich, named after a German insurance giant in 2005, and London's entertainment complex *The O2*, which also took on its corporate name in 2005.

More recently, the English and Welsh corpus suggests contradictory signals about the trend's continuing diffusion. For football stadiums, in particular, the growth rate in naming rights has at least temporarily decelerated in the 2010s. One likely explanation is linked with what Russell (2006, p. 21) has dubbed the "turn to history and commemoration," yielding a proliferation of genuflections to the past in the otherwise "hypercommodified" world of British, and especially English, football (cf. Giulianotti, 2002). This is a peculiar feature in comparison to many other European countries. Even English football's long-standing flagship enterprise Manchester United F.C. has repeatedly ruled out renaming its home, with commercial director Andy Anson stating: "Old Trafford will always be Old Trafford, we are not going to do a naming rights deal" (as cited

¹ The deal was extended in 2012, for a further £150 million, in exchange for five more years of shirt sponsorship, and stadium naming rights until 2028 (Arsenal Football Club, 2012).

in “Man Utd rule out renaming stadium,” 2005). Explicit fan pressure against naming rights has been documented in previous studies on English football culture, with probably the most widely known example being ardent protests by Newcastle United F.C. fans in 2009–12 against the club owner Mike Ashley’s stadium name sponsorship arrangements for St James’ Park (opened in 1892) (Cleland & Dixon, 2015).

Finland

In percentage terms, our Finnish corpus appears similar to England and Wales, with 7 football grounds (33.3%) and 14 indoor arenas (70.0%) having had sponsored names. Finland is the only country in our study where the average size of indoor arenas trumps football grounds (see Table 1). This is primarily due to the status of ice hockey as Finland’s biggest spectator sport.

When naming rights as an urban landmark language first emerged in Finland, new multi-purpose arenas were in the vanguard, marketed at the time with elitist overtones (Viljamaa-Laakso, 1999). An early forerunner, even in the broader European context, was the indoor arena *Typhoon* in the regional capital Turku, which took on that name in 1990 in connection with the regional banking institution TYP, and has since been known as the *Elysée Arena*, *HK Areena*, and *Gatorade Center*, as well as *Turkuhalli* in periods without sponsorship. This was followed by other indoor arenas in the metropolitan area of Helsinki such as *Hartwall Areena* in 1997, sponsored by a drinks company, and *LänsiAuto Areena* in 1999, sponsored by a local car retailer.² In the 2000s, the trend for naming deals accelerated, increasingly involving less “upmarket” and often relatively old, middle-sized indoor arenas (built during the heyday of nation-wide, largely publicly funded sporting infrastructure construction between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s) in provincial towns whose ice hockey teams tended to perform in the major national ice hockey league. As with many other regions peripheral to the sport and entertainment industries’ capital flows, name sponsors in Finnish sportscapes are characteristically national or regional firms, institutions or publicly owned companies, and only very exceptionally global corporate giants or brands (Vuolteenaho & Kolamo, 2012).

Given that many pre-1990 venues have seen naming rights sold for short-term economic gains, it is striking that cultural opposition towards this swiftly spreading phenomenon has

² *Hartwall Areena* is now known as *Hartwall Arena* (with non-Finnish spelling), while *LänsiAuto Areena* later became *Barona Areena* (2009–15) and most recently *Espoo Metro Areena*.

remained comparatively weak in Finland. There have been occasional signs of civic disaffection and institutional resistance, with suspicions aired in newspapers and online forums, the Finnish Broadcasting Company's 2011 decision to boycott sponsored venue names in its broadcasts and reports, and the Helsinki Olympic Stadium Foundation announcing that it will not sell the sacralized name it owns. Otherwise, the heritage value of names has rarely counted in the revenue-prioritizing deliberations surrounding naming deals. Rather, in the pragmatic mindsets of many politicians, authorities or marketers, particularly in smaller provincial municipalities, the key challenge in the name-sponsorship market concerns the difficulty of trading sports facilities' names, as evidenced by complaints in our media material of how "there are no buyers queuing" (cited in Korkala, 2006).

Germany

The highest density of name sponsorship among the countries covered here is in Germany, where 35 of the venues considered (63.6%) are currently sponsor-named. If focusing only on football grounds, the percentage rises to 65.7%, and if football grounds that have previously had sponsored names are included, the percentage rises further to 74.3%. As for the German indoor arenas in our sample, 60.0% currently carry the name of a sponsor, a value second only to Finland.

The first case from the German sample of a sponsor-named football ground dates from 1997, when the *Sportpark Ronhof* in the city of Fürth in Bavaria was renamed the *Playmobil-Stadion*, after the stadium's then owner, the toy manufacturer Playmobil. Subsequently, there was a peak in football-related naming rights deals in Germany in the first decade of this millennium, in line with the construction or modernization of many of the country's biggest football grounds in preparation for the 2006 FIFA World Cup. This wave of development had a significant impact on football in Germany, with even many cities that were not among the hosts of World Cup games building or refurbishing stadiums to keep up with state-of-the-art infrastructure elsewhere. Naming rights for many of these facilities were sold, with sponsors playing a key role in many projects, either directly contributing to finance construction, or re-financing the work when purchasing naming rights at a later date. In fact, 11 of the 12 stadiums built from 2000 onwards

bear the name of a sponsor.³ Since the start of this modernization boom, the economic mantra of German professional football appears to have become that in order to be successful on the pitch, a team first needs state-of-the-art infrastructure.

According to Bezold (2013), “generally fans in Germany have a very pragmatic understanding of accepting new sponsoring tools like naming rights as an additional source of income for the football club although there are cases of opposition” (p. 129). One exception occurred when the first two stadium naming rights deals brokered by officials at 1. FC Nürnberg resulted in the names *easyCredit-Stadion* (2006–12) and *Grundig Stadion* (2013–16). After the naming rights were sold for a third time in 2016 and acquired by Consorsbank, club supporters reached an agreement to rename the stadium as the *Max-Morlock-Stadion* (commemorating a legendary player) if fans contributed €800,000 to the naming rights deal. In the spring of 2017, a crowdfunding initiative to support this collected less than half of the required amount, but Consorsbank agreed to cover the remainder, making the *Max-Morlock-Stadion* a visible urban reality for the start of the 2017–18 season (“1. FC Nürnberg spielt künftig im Max-Morlock-Stadion,” 2017). Quite exceptionally in the German context, anti-corporate FC St. Pauli supporters in Hamburg have also insisted that “the name Millerntor-Stadium cannot be sold, modified or changed for the purpose of advertising, sponsoring or as a reward for any financial contributions to the club” (as cited in Merkel, 2012, p. 367; see also Bezold, 2013).

Italy

Compared to the other countries considered here, Italy exhibits a very different situation in the diffusion of sponsor-named sports venues. While the statistics for indoor arenas that have been sponsor-named (35.0%) are not far off the average percentage for indoor arenas across the whole study (46.1%), the percentage of football grounds carrying a sponsor name is by far the lowest (8.1%). By the end of the 2016-2017 season, this corresponded to only 3 relatively provincial venues out of 37 grounds in the top two divisions of Italian football: the *Mapei Stadium – Città del Tricolore* in Reggio Emilia; the *Orolog Stadium – Dino Manuzzi* in Cesena; and the *Dacia Arena* in Udine.

³ In order to safeguard FIFA’s own lucrative sponsorship commitments from being violated by “ambush marketing” endeavors, ironically eight name sponsorship deals had to be temporarily rescinded during the 2006 World Cup.

The stadium in Reggio Emilia represents a forerunner in Italian naming rights, having already borne the name *Stadio Giglio* (after a local dairy product manufacturer) from 1995 to 2012, when the privately built ground was used by A.C. Reggiana 1919, the city's biggest club, now relegated to the lower leagues. At the end of the sponsorship deal, its name was changed to *Stadio Città del Tricolore*, referencing the city's role in the development of the Italian flag. In 2013, U.S. Sassuolo Calcio, a team from a town near Reggio Emilia, was promoted to Serie A, and started using the stadium for its home games. In this process, the stadium was renamed as *Mapei Stadium – Città del Tricolore* after the chemical company chaired by the club owner.

It is striking that, while the sponsorship-based (re-)branding of indoor arenas in Italy has generally followed the broader European pattern, sales of football-related naming rights in this major European country with such a globally followed football tradition have not yet come close to the levels seen in much smaller countries like Finland, Norway or Scotland. One can speculate that this situation may stem from Italy's mainly publicly owned and older stadium building stock. Moreover, the existence of ultra-fanatic and often politically extremist supporter groups, hooliganism and organized crime in and around the stadiums, low levels of commercial "professionalization" in many clubs' management, and various financial problems among clubs may have made the purchasing of venue naming rights a less attractive option for potential sponsors with a predilection for a family-friendly and polished brand image.

Besides the three sponsor-named stadiums mentioned above, another special case is *Juventus Stadium* opened in 2011 as by far the most modern football venue in Italy. This stadium in Turin, a more metropolitan location, was renamed in July 2017 as *Allianz Stadium*, after the aforementioned Munich-headquartered insurance company that also lends its name to Germany's second-largest stadium, the *Allianz Arena*. Time will tell whether this conspicuous six-year contract will trigger a boom in naming rights in other Italian cities in the coming years.

Norway

Of the football grounds in our Norwegian data, only 8 (25.0%) presently have sponsored names. More strikingly, the 4 indoor arenas with sponsored names represent an even smaller percentage (20.0%), which is considerably lower than in the other national contexts in this study, apart from Scotland. This relatively limited number of venue name sponsorships in Norway may be explained

by sometimes ardent fan opposition against the commodification of football events (see Hognestad, 2015), but also by recalcitrant attitudes among authorities, as well as economic prosperity which may make seeking name sponsors a less compelling imperative or austerity-easing tool for Norwegian teams and municipalities.

The earliest example of a naming rights deal within the Norwegian corpus is from 2002, with *Color Line Stadion* in Ålesund, a medium-sized town in the western county of Møre og Romsdal. This football stadium was opened in 2005, but the deal predates the construction of the stadium itself, as Olav Nils Sunde—the majority stakeholder and president of the Norwegian ferry operator Color Line—donated NOK 10 million towards construction, with naming rights apparently part of the deal from the outset (“Gir ny stadion til Aalesund,” 2002). Color Line already had experience with naming deals from Germany: the indoor arena in Hamburg currently known as the *Barclaycard Arena* was originally called the *Color Line Arena*, having acquired that name a few months before the deal in Ålesund was announced.

Another case with documented transnational dimensions is in the town of Molde, also in Møre og Romsdal. Molde FK’s current home ground opened in 1998 and was originally known as *Molde Nye Stadion* (literally “Molde New Stadium”), or simply *Molde stadion*. Construction had largely been funded by Kjell Inge Røkke, the chair and majority shareholder of Aker, a major Oslo-headquartered company involved in various maritime, construction and engineering activities, and his business partner Bjørn Rune Gjelsten. The pair are known, among other things, for their controversial 1997 purchase of the then English Premier League club Wimbledon F.C., which eventually relocated to Milton Keynes in 2003. *Molde stadion*, tellingly nicknamed *Røkke-løkka* (“Røkke’s Paddock”), had its name officially changed in 2006 to *Aker Stadion*, in recognition of the long-term funding of the venue and its tenants by Aker.

Interestingly, the Aker Stadion renaming occurred at the height of an economic upswing, coinciding with a substantial number of new venue naming rights deals not only in Norway, but also in Germany, Finland, England and Wales. In Norway, at the tail end of this wave was the home ground of Sandefjord Fotball, which was named *Komplett.no Arena* in a deal with the online shopping company Komplett Group in 2007. The name was later simplified to *Komplett Arena*, but not before it had caused problems with the Norwegian Public Roads Administration refusing to put up signs to the stadium, as this could be construed as advertising (Rivrud & Lilleeng, 2008).

Arguably a signal of institutional resistance among public authorities towards corporate-branded venue names, road signs in Sandefjord now state the name of the club instead of the stadium.

Scotland

Of the football grounds in our Scottish sample, 5 (21.7%) have had sponsored names. While this is less than the percentage for the grounds in the English and Welsh corpus, it is curious to observe that all the football grounds with sponsored names are at the smaller end of the spectrum, whereas the larger and typically older stadiums in Scotland carry tradition-bound names.⁴ Meanwhile, the relatively modest number of large or middle-sized indoor arenas in Scotland—of which 3 (20.0%) have sponsored names—makes it difficult to make rigorous conclusions about these.

The earliest example in the Scottish dataset of a sponsored stadium name is from 2000, when the home ground of Dumbarton F.C. was opened with the name *Strathclyde Homes Stadium*. Dumbarton's ground is by some distance the smallest of all the Scottish stadiums in our corpus, with a capacity of 2,020, and has had four different sponsored names. This exemplifies a tendency among a substantial share of small venues, typically located outside metropolitan cores, that have already gone through multiple short-term renaming both in Scotland and elsewhere in Europe.

There is one particularly intriguing urban case in Scotland of a historic football ground, first opened in 1899, where naming rights have been sold but not used. Naming rights to *Ibrox Stadium* (formerly *Ibrox Park*), the Glasgow home ground of Rangers F.C. and third largest of Scottish football grounds, were sold in 2012 to the aforementioned billionaire Mike Ashley, the founder of Sports Direct and owner of Newcastle United F.C. (Jackson, 2014). This happened while Rangers were in considerable financial difficulty that had caused them to be forcibly relegated from the Premiership directly into the fourth-tier league. Around the time the deal is said to have already been made, an article was published on Rangers' official website with the club's chief executive apparently suggesting a naming deal may be close, and persuading supporters to endorse the prospective positive impact of any potential renaming on performances on the pitch:

Charles Green says Rangers are close to striking a deal to sell the naming rights to Ibrox—but only on terms the fans are comfortable with. [...]

⁴ The largest Scottish football ground with a sponsored name has a capacity of 8,023 (the *Paisley 2021 Stadium*), which is less than half of the average capacity of our Scottish football ground corpus (16,893).

“I’m sure people who have been associated with the club for longer than I have are still going to refer to its historical name. However, it is that history that attracts a sponsor. That’s why people are prepared to pay for the naming rights of some stadia but not others. [...] When they did the naming rights deal at St James’ Park, it brought cash in and that cash was used to acquire [striker] Demba Ba. He scored loads of goals then they sold him for £7 million so that shows what selling the naming rights can do. If you can use that money well, it’ll bring further money in.”
(Dickson, 2013)

Two years later, shortly after the story emerged that the rights had been sold by Rangers for the token sum of £1, Ashley returned the unused naming rights, while also lending the club further money (McLaughlin, 2014). As shown again here, it is not entirely uncommon to see unexpected turns of events associated with naming rights deals, and even less so to see fans as a significant stakeholder group in relation to such deals.

Interpreting the diffusion of venue naming rights in urban Europe

To start to sum up key comparative characteristics in the adoption, or otherwise, of venue naming rights in the six national contexts detailed above, of the overall 308 venues, 117 (38.0%) carry or have carried the name of a sponsor (see Table 1). While the percentage among football grounds is slightly lower (33.2%) than the average, the percentage of sponsor-named indoor arenas is markedly higher (46.1%), a pattern reflecting the fact that the indoor arenas are on average more recently built. Another pivotal observation concerns the phases of the generally contemporaneous spread of the phenomenon in the urban landscapes analyzed across the continent. Figure 1 corroborates the previous section’s narrative accounts by showing the emergence of early naming rights deals in the 1990s in each of the countries, except for Norway and Scotland. Since then, naming rights deals have spread into all the countries considered, becoming an established source of revenue for sports and entertainment businesses and local governments alike. In general, the spread of naming rights deals reached a peak in the first decade of the new millennium. Deals have continued to spread since 2010, albeit with temporarily reduced intensity (especially in Germany, and England and Wales, suggesting that the venue naming rights market may be

approaching saturation in these countries).

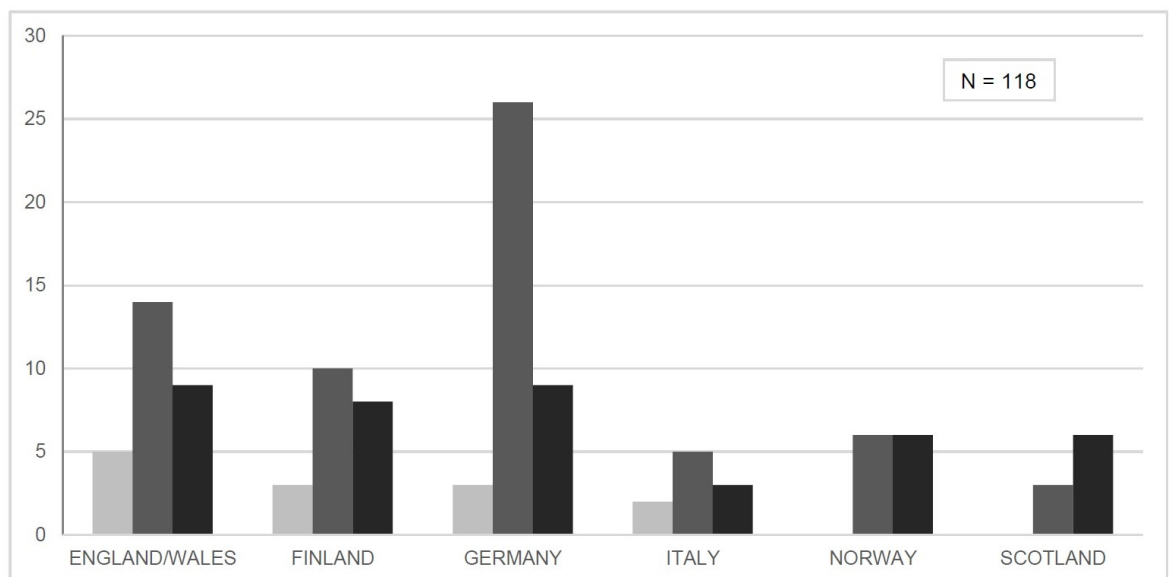
[Table 1 around here]

Table 1. Key statistical data.

	Venue type	Total number	Has been named after a sponsor	Currently named after a sponsor	Minimum capacity	Maximum capacity	Average capacity	Earliest year of construction	Percentage built after 2000
ENGLAND/WALES	Football grounds	45	15 (33.3%)	12 (26.7%)	6,912	90,000	33,691	1877	26.7%
	Indoor arenas	20	13 (65.0%)	11 (55.0%)	5,500	21,000	10,889	1871	45.0%
FINLAND	Football grounds	21	7 (33.3%)	7 (33.3%)	500	39,784	5,356	1926	9.5%
	Indoor arenas	20	14 (70.0%)	13 (65.0%)	3,500	13,349	6,081	1965	10.0%
GERMANY	Football grounds	35	26 (74.3%)	23 (65.7%)	13,138	81,360	38,186	1910	34.3%
	Indoor arenas	20	12 (60.0%)	12 (60.0%)	6,000	18,700	12,314	1909	40.0%
ITALY	Football grounds	37	3 (8.1%)	3 (8.1%)	5,510	81,277	25,434	1911	2.7%
	Indoor arenas	20	7 (35.0%)	7 (35.0%)	5,500	16,600	8,146	1956	25.0%
NORWAY	Football grounds	32	8 (25.0%)	8 (25.0%)	1,265	27,200	8,004	1919	25.0%
	Indoor arenas	20	4 (20.0%)	4 (20.0%)	3,500	15,000	6,033	1963	30.0%
SCOTLAND	Football grounds	23	5 (21.7%)*	5 (21.7%)	2,020	60,411	16,893	1879	17.4%
	Indoor arenas	15	3 (20.0%)	3 (20.0%)	1,100	13,000	5,175	1938	26.7%
COMBINED	Football grounds	193	64 (33.2%)	58 (30.1%)	500	90,000	23,579	1877	20.2%
	Indoor arenas	115	53 (46.1%)	50 (43.5%)	1,100	21,000	8,234	1871	29.6%
	Overall	308	117 (38.0%)	108 (35.1%)	500	90,000	17,850	1871	23.7%

* There is also one case in the Scottish corpus of a football ground (Ibrox Stadium) where naming rights have been sold, but which has never been named after a sponsor. This additional naming rights deal is accounted for in figures 1 and 2.

[Figure 1 around here]



	ENGLAND/WALES	FINLAND	GERMANY	ITALY	NORWAY	SCOTLAND
■ First deal 1990-99	5 (3 + 2)	3 (0 + 3)	3 (2 + 1)	2 (1 + 1)	0	0
■ First deal 2000-09	14 (8 + 6)	10 (5 + 5)	26 (16 + 10)	5 (0 + 5)	6 (5 + 1)	3 (2 + 1)
■ First deal 2010 onwards	9 (4 + 5)	8 (2 + 6)	9 (8 + 1)	3 (2 + 1)	6 (3 + 3)	6 (4 + 2)

Figure 1. Year of first naming rights deals (football grounds + indoor arenas). The summary table shows absolute figures for football grounds and indoor arenas in brackets.

Arguably, the popularity of naming rights deals varies between the studied European contexts according to several economic, regulatory, and more broadly cultural factors. The ranking of which countries have been trend-setters in corporate name diffusion, or more adverse to such deals, proves relatively straightforward. At one extreme, Germany's sporting venues (69.1%), with both football grounds (74.3%) and indoor arenas (60.0%), are positioned at the top end of our corpus (see Table 1). Besides a nation-wide spate of large-scale infrastructural developments and subsequent sales of venue naming rights in the run-up to the 2006 FIFA World Cup, the strict financial regulations of the Deutsche Fußball Liga (German Football League) prevent clubs from spending more than they earn, steering them to squeeze out the maximum revenue possible from their venues. Meanwhile, the evolution of relationships between German fan groups critical of the game's commodification and the game's commercial forces towards more compromising attitudes, as analyzed by Merkel (2012), is likely to have paved the way for greater acceptance of venue naming rights sales in German football.

At another extreme, figures for Italy, Norway, and Scotland are considerably below the average share of sold venue naming rights. As mentioned, barely a handful of Italian football grounds are currently named after a sponsor or a company owning the facility. Disreputable phenomena associated with Italian football grounds may have limited their attraction as objects of sponsorship. In contrast, the comparative health of public finances in Norway and the relative age of the larger stadiums in Scotland (along with instances of resistance from fans in attempts to change venue names in both contexts), are among explanatory factors for the small number of naming rights in these countries. For their part, England, Wales, and Finland are positioned between the aforementioned extremes in the distribution of naming rights, with England and Wales characterized by the coupling of hypercommodified football with nostalgic venue branding motifs, and Finland by numerous corporate hockey arena names and a less vibrantly traditionalist culture of football fandom (Vuolteenaho & Kolamo, 2012).

As the above-quoted persuasive address of Glasgow Rangers fans by the club's chief executive implied, clear signs of financial pressure to sell naming rights can nonetheless be seen across Europe. Despite voices of resistance in all regions studied here, it seems this pressure is increasingly being felt at venues "with heritage," a tendency that stands in contradistinction to marketing experts' recommendations such as those given by SponsorPitch (2011). In England, for instance, plans for naming rights deals have been explored by several clubs that have nonetheless

stuck with their traditional stadium names. As Wolverhampton F.C. chairman Steve Morgan put it in an interview, the club’s home could well be renamed “the ‘Something’ Molineux Stadium. Emirates are paying Arsenal about £50million over 15 years and, if we get serious sponsorship, it would be idiotic not to consider it” (as cited in “Molineux could be renamed,” 2008). Furthermore, while newly built middle-sized football grounds and bigger indoor arenas have most typically been national trend-setters in adopting this particular revenue-generating tool, there are currently signs of the phenomenon gaining traction among smaller venues and less resourceful lower-tier clubs (Bezold, 2013). In fact, multiple separate naming rights deals already figure relatively prominently in smaller venue categories in Finland, Italy, Norway, and Scotland (Figure 2).⁵ Equally strikingly, our findings reveal that, in smaller European urban contexts, contracts often last only for a couple of years or even less, whereas average naming contracts in the U.S. span between 15 and 30 years (Bezold, 2013).

[Figure 2 around here]

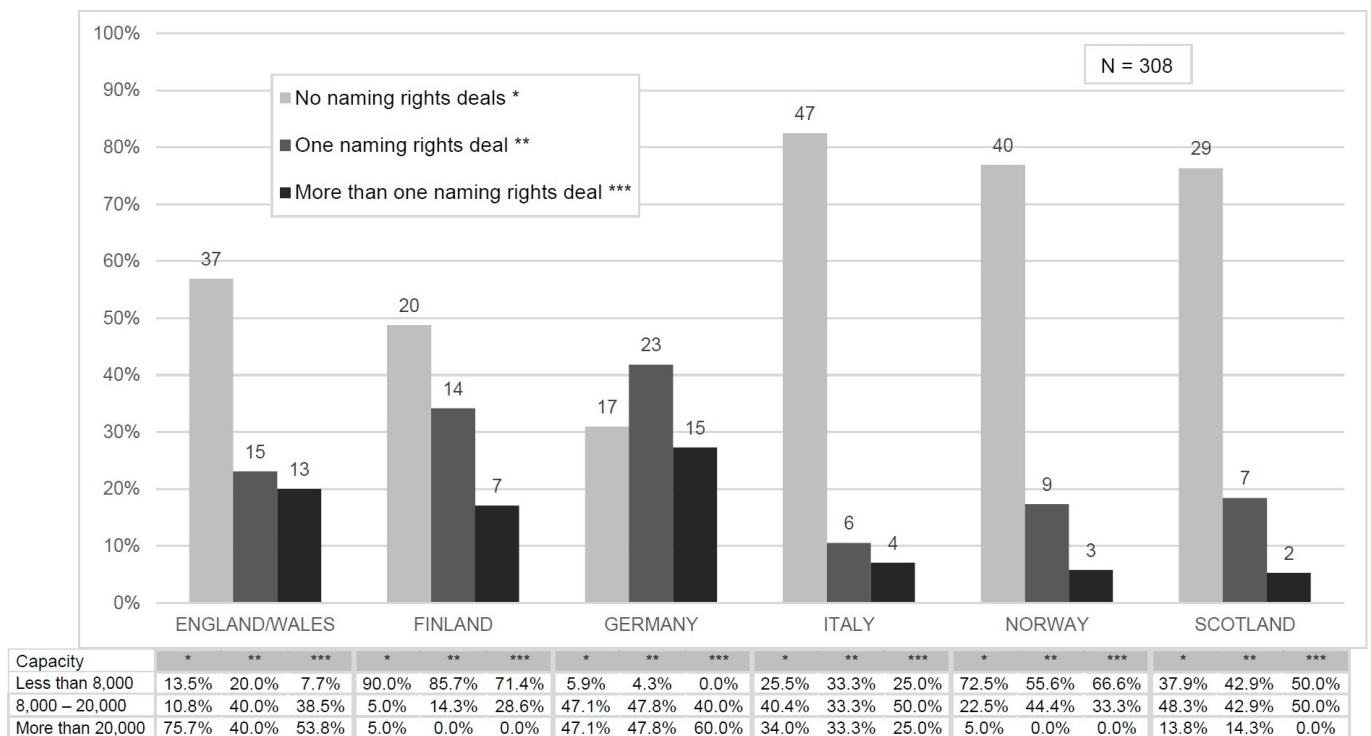


Figure 2. Number of separate naming rights deals per venue (football grounds and indoor arenas), in total and by capacity.

⁵ There are 27 double, 14 triple and 3 quadruple name sponsorships per venue in our corpus.

Furthermore, certain transurban interconnectivities are traceable on the basis of our quantitative and qualitative data. Firstly, the blossoming of “overworked globalisms” (Vuolteenaho & Kolamo, 2012) in European naming rights markets is most blatantly manifested through the prestige-enhancing generic *arena* (a kind of *sine qua non* for aspiring indoor venues, but also for a growing number of football grounds). Secondly, the re-appearance of identical or nearly identical corporate namesakes between different national and local contexts is an observable trend. Cases of such “name twins” include the *Mercedes-Benz Arena* in Berlin (formerly *O₂ World Berlin* in 2006–15) and the *Mercedes-Benz Arena* in Stuttgart, as well as the two *Barlaycard Arenas* in Birmingham and Hamburg, or Munich’s *Allianz Arena* and Turin’s newly re-branded *Allianz Stadium*. In essence, these examples epitomize a trend where heavyweight sponsors, with their global(izing) power brands (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003; Raento & Douglass, 2001), seek market credibility and expansion through brand alliances, “built corporate communication” and their own “signatures” inscribed onto different metropolitan landscapes (see e.g. Bielzer, 2013; Bouchet, Hillairet, & Bodet, 2013).⁶ In more impecunious settings, such overlaps are not uncommon either, as evinced in Finland by *Oulun Energia Areena*, *Synergia-areena* and *Energia Areena*, all eponymous to municipality-owned energy companies. Among other instances of trans-locally operating venue name sponsorship markets are Mike Ashley’s maverick moves to market his retail business empire Sports Direct around the U.K. (with short-lived naming rights blueprints or implementations in at least Newcastle, Glasgow, Oldham, and Blackpool), as well as the undertakings by the Norwegian owners of Aker and Color Line.

In the European urban context characterized by a patchwork of smaller and medium-sized cities alongside fewer true mega-cities (Pradel i Miquel, Paalzow, & Martin-Brelot, 2013), however, locally specific name sponsorship arrangements are more prevalent in the light of our data. Taking another example from Finland, the new corporate name *Trust Kapital Areena* for an ice hockey venue in Kuopio (until then bearing its original no-frills name *Kuopion jäähalli*), was announced in 2012. On this occasion, the tenant team Kalpa’s chief executive dubbed a miscellaneous set of locally based corporations from brewing and forestry machinery to a local newspaper and banking

⁶ These trends go far beyond the scope of our present corpus, with examples such as 梅赛德斯-奔驰文化中心 (the *Mercedes-Benz Arena*) in Shanghai, China, the *Mercedes-Benz Stadium* in Atlanta, Georgia, and the *Mercedes-Benz Superdome* in New Orleans, Louisiana, not to mention the *Allianz Park* in London, England, *Allianz Parque* in São Paulo, Brazil, the *Allianz Riviera* in Nice, France, the *Allianz Stadion* in Vienna, Austria, and the *Allianz Stadium* in Moore Park, Australia.

companies as its “mega-partners,” and specifically thanked the city council for its collaboration in the forging of the naming rights deal (Kalpa Hockey, n.d.).⁷ More generally, the adoption of venue naming rights in Europe seems to have been more a matter of a culturally “diffuse” learning process—with neoliberalized event cities, towns, and their sporting and entertainment organizations absorbing ideas from each other (and from cities in the rest of the world: see e.g. Crompton & Howard, 2003)—than an example *par excellence* of systematic transurban policy mobility (cf. Klauser, 2011; McCann, 2013). In our data, the only notable exceptions to this observation were the pre- and post-event financial arrangements around the German stadium building boom in the mid-2000s.

That said, in a broad chronological picture the documented national trends, peaks and stagnation phases in the diffusion of venue name sponsorship correlate with the dynamics of sporting and entertainment venue construction. Various dimensions of this linkage are readable in Figure 3, which compares naming patterns in building stock from before and after the advent of venue name sponsorship in Europe. Overall, the considerably higher sponsor-named percentage for post-1990 venues (59.2%) than older facilities (24.5%) reflects the tendency to put revenue gained by name sponsorship deals towards covering the costs of construction. Arguably mirroring a gradual cultural acceptance of venue naming rights, as well as the several facilities built and refurbished for Germany’s World Cup tournament, and the pre-crisis economic boom of the new millennium, in 2005–06 alone as much as 8.8% (27 venues) of the entire corpus of venues entered their first naming rights deals. Since the doldrums of the late-2000s, the European growth rate in naming rights deals has been considerably steadier and slower. In itself, the fact that only 10 out of 115 indoor arenas in our corpus are pre-1960 constructions explains the much higher propensity for naming rights in this event facility subcategory. Overall, the chronological logic behind the (non-)adoption of naming rights deals is relatively straightforward: on the one hand, new and state-of-the-art venues attract potential sponsors while, on the other hand, the longer the history of a venue is, the less likely it is to have been renamed after the highest corporate bidder.

[Figure 3 around here]

⁷ This name sponsorship lasted for roughly one and half years and was replaced by *Data Group Arena*, based on a three-year contract.

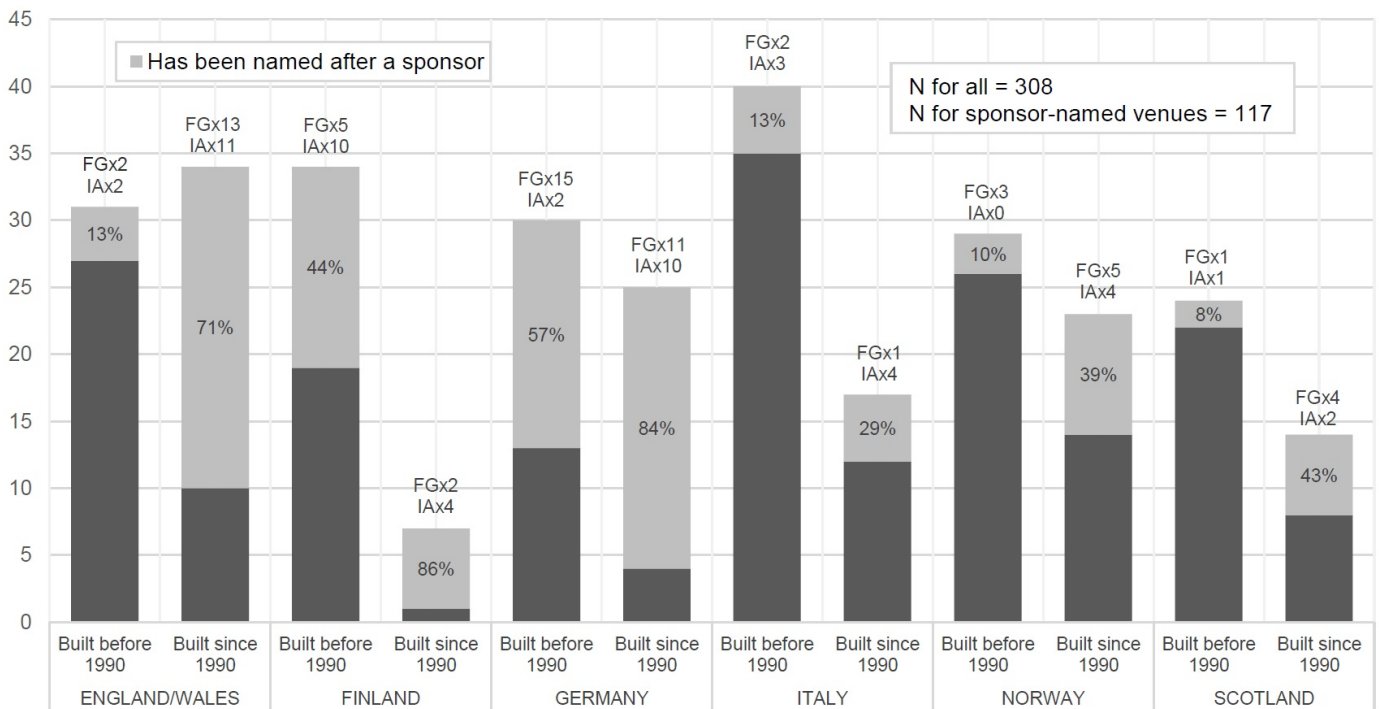


Figure 3. Football grounds and indoor arenas built before and since 1990, including percentages of venues that have been named after one or more corporate sponsors.

This brings us to a second set of explanatory factors, touched upon several times above, pertaining to the emergence of variably vociferous fan movements in different countries. Not uncommonly, venue naming rights deals have been targeted in these groups' criticism of the excessive commercialization of football. While venue and team owners almost by definition have the upper hand in (re)naming their facilities, fans, as a stakeholder group, have at least occasionally had a say in decisions related to venue naming. Intriguingly in this regard, this study has indicated considerable differences between the three studied contexts with the most internationally followed football leagues: England and Wales, Italy, and Germany. In the former two contexts, mixed attitudes to the diffusion (or rather non-diffusion in the Italian case) of naming rights have been typical, whereas Germany's situation (with some notable exceptions) is characterized by more market-pragmatist stances. Expectedly, the situation in England has irritated many market-favorable pundits. With James Lawton's (2011) praise of "the Germans [...]" who remain the last hope of financial reality [in] Europe," many Newcastle fans' ferocity against the renaming of St James' Park is dismissed as follows: "[T]he idea that the name of a football stadium can ever again be more important than a major injection of income is at the very best quaint" (Lawton 2011). The fact remains, however, that select symbols steeped in the game's

communal historicity have in the last two decades been effectively turned into marketing assets, especially in the context of the English Premier League (Russell, 2006). In the country of origin of the world's most-watched spectator sport, many old stadiums have developed into veritable football pantheons, attracting tourists and sports pilgrims. In the words of the Premier League's executive chairman, Richard Scudamore: "The more global you get, the more local you need to be" (as cited in Ebner, 2013). As long as upholding tradition can be seen to make sense in financial and marketing terms, and the direct commodification of inherited venue names is simultaneously perceived by many as a threat, it is unlikely that the sale of naming rights will develop into the only popular option in naming sporting landscapes.

Conclusions

Increasingly, not only sporting and entertainment facilities, but also multiple other types of urban landscapes are being subjected to naming rights arrangements (see e.g. Rose-Redwood, 2011; see also this issue's introduction). Nonetheless, the status of entertainment and particularly sports venues at the forefront of the entire corporatized landmark language phenomenon seems undeniable. In Europe, sporting facilities have been in the vanguard of implementing naming rights deals since the early-1990s, and particularly in the first decade of the new millennium. It is, however, symptomatic of the relative tardiness in the phenomenon's propagation, especially across the continent's older football grounds, that in all countries in focus protests against venue naming rights have surfaced at least occasionally.⁸ Usually, the less historic a venue is, the more (promised) sponsorship money that is set to benefit venue tenants or owners through a name sponsorship deal, and the less (ethically or otherwise) problematic the sponsoring company's engagement is generally seen to be by locals, the easier it is to implement venue name sponsorship without facing insurmountable opposition.

Beyond this general picture, this article has documented a range of national peculiarities related to economic and cultural circumstances in the (non-)diffusion of venue naming rights deals

⁸ In the U.S., meanwhile, spatial naming rights have, in most cases, been accepted with much less opposition (see Bezold, 2013; Leeds, Leeds, & Pistolet, 2007). Notable exceptions to this rule include considerable public opposition to the renaming of San Francisco's now demolished *Candlestick Park* after corporate sponsors in 1995–2008, and protests against the corporate name of *Invesco Field at Mile High* in Denver in 2001–11.

across a European patchwork of states, cities and towns of varying sizes and economic fortunes. In Norway, for instance, the relative health of public finances has apparently meant less financial pressure for the sale of naming rights, whereas in Italy the incidence of less family-friendly phenomena in and around football stadiums has made potential sponsors reluctant to invest in naming rights. In Finland and Germany, meanwhile, the prevalence of market-pragmatic attitudes has paved the way for the adoption of corporatized names. With the venue naming rights trend, the urban effects of neoliberalism have varied considerably between the six contexts studied. Locally embedded interactions between redevelopment projects related to one-off and spatio-temporally diffuse sporting events, country- and locality-specific institutional responses, and varying intense civic contestations of this particular culturally inflected aspect of the commodification of space, all illustrate the locally path-dependent dimensions of neoliberal urbanism (see Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Schönig & Schipper, 2016).

To date, very few if any comparative and urban theory-informed analyses have existed on the European-scale spread of the name-sponsoring phenomenon. With our focus on six select contexts and only major sporting and entertainment venues, this study's interpretations should not be seen as exhaustive, but have indicated some significant trends in geographical diffusion. In addition to our Europe-specific empirical findings, we hope to have signaled promising directions for future research agendas and designs in urban place-name scholarship. For urban geographers, much theoretical and empirical interest lies in the documented community-rooted topophilic (Bale, 2000; Tuan, 1974) or indeed toponymophilic (cf. Kostanski, 2009) meanings often set against the hypercommodification of venues, as well as in the functions of inherited toponyms in nostalgia-oriented heritage production and place marketing. Clearly, more research is also needed on the effects of particular regulatory and legislative frameworks on the diffusion of name sponsorships as well as reasons for the counter-trend in which venue naming rights not only proliferate but can also lapse. This research has also touched upon the promises and grievances of spatial naming rights in urban contexts of varying sizes and degrees of connectivity to major hubs and flows of the capitalist world economy. Many of our findings have shown the symbolic hierarchization of space between, on the one hand, affluent urban areas allied with corporate giants and, on the other hand, those left bereft of the advantages of extremely lucrative and more long-standing naming rights deals. One striking feature in many smaller European urban settlements concerns the serial, opportunistic and short-term re-labeling of venues through separate contracts, amounting in

Bezold's (2013) terminology to an incapability of utilizing naming rights as a sustainably "strategic" partnership and marketing communication tool. While contemporary metropolises, cities, and towns are characteristically in the same neoliberal boat of aspiring for growth, deploying austerity measures and seeking to plug budget holes, the differing prerequisites for toponymic sponsorship arrangements call for further research into their unequal spatial consequences in Europe and beyond.

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