When Controversy Spills Over

How Announcing a Controversial Sponsor Shapes Property Outcomes

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Abstract

Partnering with controversial sponsors is today common in sports. While prior work has focused on the brand outcomes for sponsors (the organizations providing financial support), much less is known about how controversial sponsors impact the properties (the teams or events receiving the financial support) they sponsor. This paper investigates how announcing a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor shapes attitudes toward the property being sponsored and whether a brief financial justification from the property limits the damage the partnership has on its brand. Drawing on congruity theory and attribution theory, a model in which sponsor-property fit and perceived motives mediate these effects is tested. A 2x2 between-subjects online experiment with Swedish consumers manipulates the sponsor type and the presence of a financial justification. The results show that a controversial sponsorship strongly impacts attitudes negatively. Analysis further reveals that the attitudinal penalty is transmitted through lower perceived fit and lower altruistic motive attributions, operating both independently and sequentially. Moreover, the financial justification is found to have no significant effect in mitigating the attitudinal negative effect. Complementary sentiment and thematic analyses of open-ended responses support the findings, demonstrating that controversial sponsors elicit predominantly ethical concerns. The study advances sponsorship literature by shifting attention to the property-side and investigating a potential strategy of risk mitigation. Managerially, the results highlight the risks of aligning with controversial sponsors and the limited effectiveness of brief justifications at the moment of announcement.

Keywords: *Controversial Sponsorship, Sports Sponsorship, Sports Marketing, Attribution Theory, Congruity Theory, Sponsorship Fit, Image Repair*

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1 Introduction

How does announcing a controversial sponsor (the organizations providing financial support) shape consumer attitudes toward the sponsored property (the teams or events receiving the financial support), and can a simple explanation from that property soften negative reactions? This question has become increasingly important as sports organizations depend more on sponsorship agreements for operations, while sponsors prioritize cost-cutting (Deloitte, 2025a, 2025b). Simultaneously, many properties frequently accept sponsors from categories widely considered controversial within the sports sponsorship landscape (Crompton, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2025; Maher et al., 2006).

To emphasize the vast influence sponsorships have on the sports industry, one can let the numbers speak. As one of the largest financial streams in sport, global sponsorship revenue is projected to grow by 8% annually, reaching almost 190 billion USD by 2030 (Statista, 2024). Sponsorship can be defined as "a cash and/or in-kind fee paid to a property (typically a sports, entertainment, non-profit event or organization) in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that property" (Cornwell et al., 2005). With this definition, it becomes evident that the relationship between sponsors and properties should be mutually dependent and mutually beneficial. As budgets tighten and companies prioritize cost reductions (Deloitte, 2025a), many properties rely heavily on sponsors whose values and reputations vary widely (Maher et al., 2006). Although no established definition exists, the construct of controversial sponsors is commonly associated with ethically sensitive or norm-challenging characteristics (Jacobs et al., 2025). That said, a significant share of sponsorship revenue comes from controversial sectors, including state-linked entities, gambling companies, alcohol brands and extractive industries (Crompton, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2025; Peluso et al., 2019).

A recent Swedish case illustrates how reputational stakes can escalate. In 2025, the Falsterbo Horse Show accepted Al Shira'aa Stables, an equestrian organization founded by United Arab Emirates royalty, as their new title sponsor. Media criticism was swift, accusing the event of having "sold its soul," and the partnership collapsed within a month (Falsterbo Horse Show, 2025; Östh Gustafsson, 2025). The Falsterbo case is neither unique nor likely to be the last. Among many others, similar controversies have surrounded state-linked extractive industry sponsors, gambling brands and crypto firms, including Saudi Arabian Aramco in Formula 1, front-of-shirt betting sponsors in the Premier League and FTX's arena deal in Miami (Aramco, 2025; Premier League, 2023; Reynolds, 2023). These examples highlight a practical dilemma. Sponsorships provide essential financial resources, but pairing with the wrong partner can trigger public backlash, accusations of sportswashing and potential long-term reputational harm for the property (Fruh et al., 2023; Ganji, 2023). Although reasons behind accepting publicly scrutinized sponsors are not evident, a frequently used explanation is financial reasons (Crompton, 2014). This is further emphasized by the case of the Falstebo Horse Show, where management said that their decision behind entering the partnership lied in the money being provided (Lundberg, 2025).

From a theoretical perspective, sponsorship research has mainly focused on benefits and consequences from the lens of the sponsor. Core concepts in the literature include image transfer, where associations linked to the property spill over to the sponsor (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), sponsor-property fit as a form of congruence between the parties (Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955; Speed & Thompson, 2000) and attribution-based inferences about motives, where observers infer whether actions are driven by public or self-serving reasons (Rifon et al., 2004).

However, notable gaps remain. First, research examining outcomes for the property remains limited. This gap is consequential in the context of controversial sponsorships, where the few studies that do adopt a property-side lens already indicate that properties can suffer reputational harm (Kelly et al., 2016; Toscani & Prendergast, 2018). Second, although sponsor-property fit and attributed motives often operate as mechanisms in sponsorship literature, virtually none have tested whether these operate in synergy with regard to the perspective of the property with a controversial sponsor (Rifon et al., 2004). Third, there is little empirical evidence on whether a brief explanation from the property can mitigate negative reactions, despite explicit calls for research on risk-reducing strategies in controversial sponsorship contexts (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020).

To address these gaps, this study employs a 2x2 online experiment exposing participants to a Swedish football sponsorship announcement. Manipulating sponsor type (controversial vs. non-controversial) and financial justification, we measured attitude toward the property, perceived fit and attributed motives. Additionally, open-ended responses underwent sentiment scoring and thematic analysis. This complements the scale-based measures, offering richer insight into how participants interpret and emotionally frame the decision.

The remainder of the study is structured as follows: Section 2 integrates prior research on sponsorship, controversy, sponsor-property fit and attribution processes to develop the hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the methodology, including the pre-study, the main experiment, the measures and the data collection procedure. Section 4 reports the empirical results, including the complementary analysis of open-ended responses. Section 5 discusses the findings in light of the purpose, outlines theoretical and managerial implications and highlights limitations and directions for future research.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how announcing a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor affects attitudes toward the sponsored property, and to test whether a brief financial justification shapes this relationship. Drawing on insights from sponsorship research, congruity theory, and attribution theory, the study seeks to shed light on the mechanisms through which such sponsorship decisions are interpreted by consumers. This purpose is addressed through an experimental research design.

2 Theory and Hypothesis Development

This section develops five hypotheses through theoretical components. It first explains how controversial sponsors can cause negative spillover effects to the property, then examines justification as a potential risk buffer. Next, congruity and attribution theory link audience interpretations of the partnership with the motives attributed. Finally, a sequential path from fit to motives is proposed and presented.

2.1 Sponsorship and Property-Side Outcomes

Sponsorship is a common marketing communication tool in which one sponsor invests in a property in exchange for the right to associate with the property's brand image in consumers' minds (Cornwell & Maignan, 1998). The value of sponsorship has been conceptualized in prior research as stemming from associative networks, where brand image refers to "the associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory" (Keller, 1993). Such brand associations are a core component of brand equity (Aaker, 1992).

To further understand how alliances between brands impact brand associations, literature often turns to the associative network memory model (Spry et al., 2011). The model suggests that consumers hold a set of nodes for both the property and the sponsor, with a partnership bridging these networks. Those bridges allow image transfer, in which associations attached to one party can spill over to the other (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Simonin & Ruth, 1998). This means that a favorable view of an event likely contributes to favorable outcomes for the sponsor. Because each brand becomes represented within the other's association set, this transfer is plausibly reciprocal (Till & Shimp, 1998).

Although sponsorship research has been shown to foster positive associations, the partnership can also carry risks, such as when a team's poor performance damages the credibility and trust of its sponsors (Yuan et al., 2019) or when scandals involving the property transfer negative associations to the sponsor (Chien et al., 2016). Another external influence on sponsorship outcomes is controversy, as sponsorships involving ethically sensitive or contested industries affect consumer attitudes and behaviors (Bestman et al., 2015; Hing et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2014). Within this perspective, the concept of bidirectional image transfer suggests that sponsors can also shape the property's image (Prendergast et al., 2016), meaning that properties may face reputational consequences based on the sponsors they choose to associate with (Crompton, 2014).

Although the above indicate that a property associated with a controversial sponsor would risk attitudinal penalties, research on the reciprocal influence on attitudes toward the property is limited (Till & Shimp, 1998). Consistent with this view, the limited empirical work on property-side effects finds that controversial categories (e.g., alcohol) can impact the brand outcomes for the property (Kelly et al., 2016). Thus, the following hypothesis is advanced:

H1. *Exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor leads to less favorable attitudes toward the property.*

2.2 Justification as a Risk Buffer

In crisis communication literature, Benoit (1997) proposes an image repair framework and defines an attack as a situation in which a responsible actor is blamed for an act that audiences deem offensive. Complementing this, literature suggests that organizations can adopt diminish strategies, such as justification, in which crisis managers seek to minimize the audience's perceptions of the damage caused by the act (Coombs, 2007).

When an entity makes a decision not favored by the public, responsibility for that action is often clear to the audience and may be difficult to alter. This is especially evident in sponsorship contexts where the property is willingly engaged in the partnership (Cornwell et al., 2005). When public disapproval is present, placing the act in a more favorable context, referred to as transcendence (e.g., by justifying the decision as a financial necessity), can reduce offensiveness (Benoit, 1997). By doing so, the negative effect the act has on the brand can be reduced. Consistent with this logic, Parker and Fink (2010) show that a property's post-controversy communication can shape fan attitudes. Moreover, transcendence strategies (like those of justification) can operate as an immediate image-repair response, consistent with the view that crisis communication can be used to repair and/or prevent reputational damage (Coombs & Holladay, 2005).

Adding to this perspective, Peluso et al. (2019) provide insights consistent with the idea that financial justifications are associated with less negative evaluations of a controversial sponsorship. While not experimentally manipulating justification, their findings nevertheless indicate that financial explanations naturally arise in a majority of consumers' reasoning, and are associated with more positive interpretations of controversial partnerships. In other words, audiences may spontaneously engage in transcendence-like thinking when they believe the property faces financial constraints. Crisis-communication theory may suggest that making this rationale explicit could reduce perceived offensiveness by reframing the act as necessary (Benoit, 1997). Therefore, even though Peluso et al. (2019) provide correlational rather than causal evidence, their results offer a theoretically consistent foundation for hypothesizing a moderating effect. Thus, the following hypothesis is presented:

H2. *Providing a financial justification (vs. no justification) moderates the effect of a controversial sponsor (vs. non-controversial) on attitudes toward the property.*

2.3 Congruity Theory and Sponsor-Property Fit

Scholars have proposed several mechanisms to explain how sponsorship creates value, including mere exposure, congruence, motive attribution and reactivation processes (Bennett, 1999; Cornwell et al., 2005; Dean, 2002; Petty et al., 1983; Pham & Vanhuele, 1997). Focusing on one of these mechanisms, which is among the most common in the sponsorship literature, congruence can be understood through congruity theory (Mandler, 1982; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Congruence (fit) within the sponsorship literature is commonly referred to as compatibility (Ruth & Simonin, 2003) or relatedness and relevance (Johar & Pham, 1999) between the parties of a sponsorship.

There are generally two types of sponsor-property fit, functional-based and image-based (Prendergast et al., 2010). Functional-based fit occurs when a sponsor's product or service is intrinsically aligned with the property (e.g., a running shoe brand sponsoring a marathon) (Gwinner, 1997). In this study, we align with the image-based fit dimension, which refers to a sponsor partnership in which the property's image aligns with the brand's on a value-driven level (Benezra, 1996; Gwinner, 1997).

Foundational work on sponsorship congruence shows that high perceived fit between an event and its sponsor strengthens image transfer and improves attitudes toward the sponsor (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; McDaniel, 1999). Congruity theory helps explain this effect. Consumers prefer combinations that align with existing cognitive schemas and experience greater cognitive comfort when two objects "go together" (Mandler, 1982; Walzel et al., 2025). Although prior research has primarily examined how fit benefits the sponsor (Speed & Thompson, 2000), the same logic implies that fit should also shape evaluations of the property. Since a partnership that appears coherent and image-aligned is more likely to be evaluated favorably. As incongruent sponsorships have been shown to slow image transfer (Meenaghan, 2001), and controversial sponsors are perceived as less ethical and moral (Peluso et al., 2019), lower perceived sponsor-property fit is therefore expected to function as a mediator between sponsor type and attitudes toward the property. Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit.*

Beyond its direct effect on evaluations, low fit does not simply remain an isolated perception but also raises the question of why such a mismatched partnership exists. In other words, a perceived mismatch can act as a cue that prompts attributional reasoning, where consumers try to explain the property's decision to accept the sponsor (Dean, 2002; Messner & Reinhard, 2012; Rifon et al., 2004). The next section elaborates on how this process of motive attribution unfolds.

2.4 Attribution Theory and Perceived Motives

Attribution theory is one of the most frequently used concepts in sponsorship research (Crompton, 2014; Dean, 2002; Rifon et al., 2004; Walzel et al., 2025). It explains how individuals make causal interpretations about the reasons behind others' actions based on what they observe and experience, including those of organizations (Jones & Davis, 1965). Rather than simply accepting others' actions, people actively infer underlying motives behind them, and these perceived motives play a crucial role in shaping subsequent evaluations. Kelley (1973) proposes that motivations can be seen as either internal or external. Internal motivations reflect the actor's genuine values, intentions and sincerity, whereas external motivations are driven by situational rewards or opportunistic considerations. It is further proposed that this interpretation of motives, rather than the action itself, has the most significant impact on people's evaluations.

The perceived motives of the sponsor (altruistic vs. self-serving) are commonly used to explain why subsequent evaluations are worse (Messner & Reinhard, 2012; Peluso et al., 2019; Rifon et al., 2004; Walzel et al., 2025). More in line with the purpose of this study, Crompton (2014) extends the application of this theory to the property side, suggesting how a controversial sponsor can lead to reputational risks for the property. In the case of a partnership announcement between a property and a controversial sponsor, people assign motives to both the sponsor and the property for entering the deal (Crompton, 2014). Drawing on attribution theory, the property's decision to enter into a sponsorship deal with a controversial sponsor can be seen as more or less altruistic. For example, consumers may view the team as "selling out" because it accepts money generated by controversial activities (Crompton, 2014). Building on this reasoning, a sponsorship agreement with a controversial sponsor introduces reputational risk for the property because audiences interpret the decision through the lens of motive attribution. If the deal is perceived as opportunistic or profit-driven, consumers are likely to downgrade their evaluations of the property, leading to more negative brand attitudes. Thus, attributed motives are expected to act in a mediating role, and the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived motives.*

2.5 Sponsor-Property Fit as a Cue for Motive Attribution

As previously established, fit can act as a cue for attributes (Tian & Yuan, 2013), meaning that the level of sponsorship-fit can affect consumers' tendency to form motive perceptions. When a sponsorship pairing is perceived as low-fit, consumers are prompted to interpret or rationalize the decision (Messner & Reinhard, 2012; Rifon et al., 2004). As a result, consumers think more thoroughly about the true motivations behind a partnership (Dean, 2002; Messner & Reinhard, 2012). Consistent with this logic, Rifon et al. (2004) emphasize that incongruent sponsor-cause pairings generate greater cognitive elaboration, which increases the likelihood that audiences weaken beliefs in altruistic motives.

When sponsor-property fit is low, consumers tend to become skeptical of the partnership and attribute less altruistic motives to the sponsor. In contrast, a high fit tends to lead to increased attribution of these motives (Rifon et al., 2004). Although not focusing on the property, prior research suggests that higher fit leads to more altruistic motive attributions about the sponsor. This study applies the same logic to the property side, proposing that a similar effect is expected.

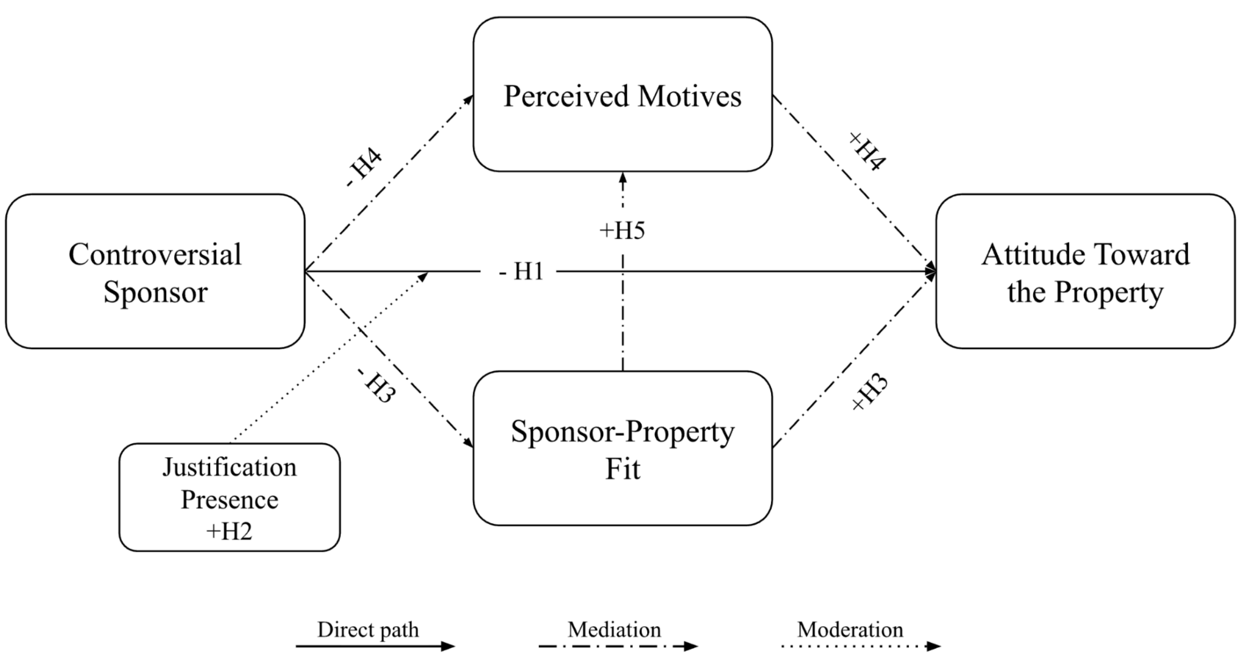
A two-step serial mediation process is therefore proposed, where having a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor lowers perceived sponsor-property fit. In turn, this lowers perceived altruistic motives and ultimately leads to less favorable attitudes toward the property. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H5. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is serially mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives.*

2.6 Visualization of the Hypotheses

To summarize, the experimental manipulations are expected to directly influence attitudes toward the property depending on whether the sponsor is controversial or not (H1). The presence of a brief financial justification is hypothesized to mitigate this negative effect on the direct path (H2). In addition, the effect of the sponsor is expected to operate through two ordered cognitive mechanisms. First, lower perceived sponsor-property fit (H3) and second, lower perceived altruistic motives (H4). Since perceptions of fit are theorized to inform subsequent motive attribution, these mediators are expected to operate sequentially (H5).

Figure 1. Visualization of the Hypotheses



3 Methodology

This section explains the methodological choices behind the study. First, the overall research approach and factorial between-subjects experiment are outlined. Second, the pre-study is described, including its purpose, design, sample and key results validating the manipulations. Third, the main study is presented, covering the experimental setup, survey flow, stimuli and measures, followed by a description of data collection and sampling. The section ends with an assessment of validity and reliability to demonstrate the robustness of the research design.

3.1 Research Approach

As established, this study employs a between-subjects 2x2 factorial experimental design administered via an online survey. The method is classified as quantitative, in which all hypotheses were deductively derived from existing theories and prior empirical research (Bryman, 2018, p. 49). A quantitative experimental approach is particularly suitable for testing causal effects and has been widely used in sponsorship research, especially in studies examining scandals, controversies and reputation spillover (Chien et al., 2016; Kelly et al., 2014, 2016; Peluso et al., 2019; Roehm & Tybout, 2006; Walzel et al., 2025). Moreover, since the goal is to generalize insights from a limited sample to a broader context, a quantitative approach is warranted and typically superior to qualitative alternatives (Eliasson, 2018). In addition to closed-ended measures, the study collected open-ended comments. We later analyzed them with computational text analytics to derive quantitative variables (sentiment polarity) and thematic analysis for complementary analyses (Zhao et al., 2023). Following standard practice, a .05 significance level was adopted for statistical tests (Söderlund, 2018, p. 156).

3.2 Pre-Study

3.2.1 Purpose of Pre-Study

The purpose of the pre-study was to validate the core experimental manipulation before the main experiment. Conducting a pre-study is a recommended procedure in experimental research to ensure that observed effects in the main study can be attributed to the intended manipulation rather than to other confounding factors (Perdue & Summers, 1986; Söderlund, 2018, pp. 87-88). Specifically, the pre-study measured Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) (Brunk, 2012) and perceived controversiality, while also testing for justification. This was to verify that exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial sponsor) produced significant differences in perceived ethicality. In parallel, the study also ensured that the justification statement was perceived as intended. Together, these steps confirmed the validity and distinctiveness of the manipulations for use in the main experiment.

3.2.2 Pre-Study Design

In a short online questionnaire, respondents were randomly assigned to one of two treatments. Both treatments consisted of a text announcing that a football team in the Swedish Allsvenskan league (Sweden's top football league) had gained a new sponsor, either a Saudi Arabian oil company or a renewable energy company, with the same fictitious neutral name, *Adlar Energy*. Crucially, a text-only format was employed to strictly isolate the manipulations, establishing construct validity (the extent to which a measure accurately represents the construct it is intended to capture) without visual interference. This aligns with Geuens and De Pelsmacker (2017), who warn that complex stimuli can confuse viewers and distract them from the intended manipulation. This step ensured the concepts were effective before considering ecological validity (the extent to which the experimental setting and stimuli resemble real-world situations) in the main experiment.

After reading the text, participants rated the sponsor on Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) (Brunk, 2012) and perceived controversiality "To what extent do you consider the sponsor to be controversial?" (1-7)". The six item Likert scale, CPE was used to operationalize controversy, as prior research defines controversial sponsors as brands perceived to violate social or moral norms (Peluso et al., 2019). To confirm that the concept of controversy is highly understood and established in Sweden, a keyword search for "controversy" in the *Retriever Research* database, covering Swedish media between 2022 and 2025, yielded 6,234 results (Retriever, 2025).

To ensure the reliability of the manipulations, a two-item manipulation check was developed to verify that participants successfully processed the justification message (Perdue & Summers, 1986; Söderlund, 2018, pp. 87-88). The items (e.g., "The club provided an explanation for its sponsorship decision") were designed to have high face validity (the extent to which a measurement appears to capture the intended construct based on subjective judgment) by directly referencing the content of the stimuli.

3.2.3 Pre-Study Sample

In total, the online survey received 65 responses randomly distributed between two groups. Through anonymous links and QR codes, the respondents were collected primarily by university students at the Stockholm School of Economics and personal contacts of the authors. This implies that a non-probability convenience sampling technique was adopted (Malhotra, 2020, p. 363).

3.2.4 Pre-Study Results

To ensure that the Consumer Perceived Ethicality (CPE) and Justification items could be combined into indices, a reliability analysis was conducted yielding acceptable internal consistency with regard to Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha_{\text{CPE}} = .96$; $\alpha_{\text{Justification}} = .86$). An independent-samples t-test showed significant difference between the groups ($p < .001$) with higher CPE in the non-controversial treatment ($M_{\text{Non-controversial}} = 4.97$, $SD = 0.89$, $n = 34$) than in the controversial treatment ($M_{\text{Controversial}} = 2.54$, $SD = 1.28$, $n = 31$). Another independent-samples t-test on the question of perceived controversiality was also conducted. The results indicated a significant difference ($p < .001$) between groups where the controversial treatment had higher perceived controversiality ($M_{\text{Controversial}} = 5.83$, $SD = 1.29$, $n = 30$) than the non-controversial treatment ($M_{\text{Non-controversial}} = 2.43$, $SD = 1.27$, $n = 35$). These results are illustrated in Table 1.

Moreover, a Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong, significant negative correlation between the indexed CPE and the perceived level of controversiality ($r = -.83$, $p < .001$, $n = 63$). This means that as perceived controversiality increases, CPE drops sharply. Further testing was done on justification as a manipulation tool through a one-sample t-test against the scale midpoint (3.5) that showed that participants in the justification treatment perceived the sponsor as more justified than neutral ($M = 4.87$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(63) = 4.80$, $p < .001$).

Table 1. Pre-Study results CPE & Perceived Controversiality

Sponsor type	Nr Respondents	Mean value	p-value
Consumer Perceived Ethicality			<.001
Controversial	31	*M* = 2.54	
Non-Controversial	34	*M* = 4.97	
Perceived Controversiality			<.001
Controversial	30	*M* = 5.83	
Non-Controversial	34	*M* = 2.43	

On the whole, the stimuli was validated in the pre-study which allowed it to be used in the main study.

3.3 Main Study

3.3.1 Purpose of Main Study

The purpose of the main study was to test the causal effects of controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsorship exposure and financial justification on brand attitude toward the property. A further aim was to examine whether these effects are mediated by sponsor-property fit and perceived motives. The objective was to empirically understand the consequences on property attitudes and the underlying mechanisms behind the effect.

3.3.2 Main Study Design

The study used an experimental design in which the independent variables were systematically manipulated to assess their causal effects on the dependent variable (attitude toward the property). An experimental approach is widely regarded as appropriate and theoretically justified when the objective is to test causal claims on the dependent variable (Söderlund, 2018, pp. 16-18). Moreover, the experiment applied a 2x2 factorial design (see Figure 2), which can be argued to be a contemporary and relevant approach (Söderlund, 2018, p. 46).

Figure 2. 2x2 Between-Subjects Design

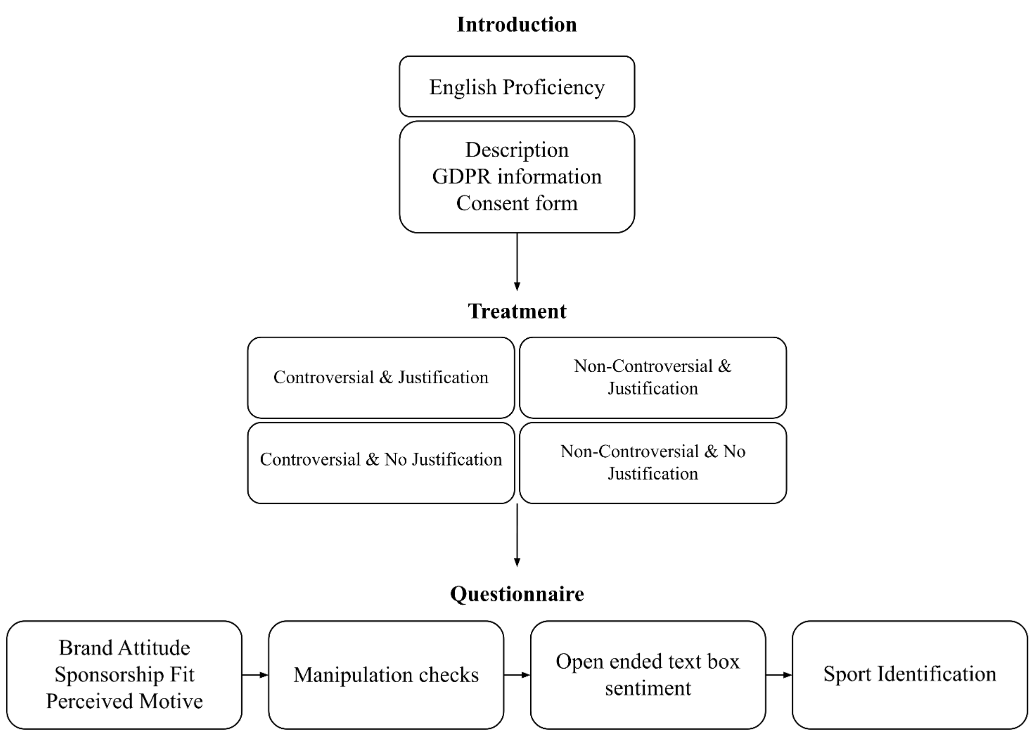
	Financial justification	No justification
Controversial sponsor	Controversial sponsor presented with a financial justification n = 111	Controversial sponsor presented with no justification n = 109
Non-controversial sponsor	Non-controversial sponsor presented with a financial justification n = 119	Non-controversial sponsor presented with no justification n = 120

In an online survey, respondents first confirmed that they could participate in English and provided informed consent, including information about the study purpose and GDPR compliance. They were then randomly allocated to one of four experimental treatments based on sponsor type (controversial vs. non-controversial) and justification (present vs. absent) (see treatments in Appendix A). This ensured that respondents had an equal chance of being exposed to the different treatments (Söderlund, 2018, pp. 34-36). To ensure that participants thoroughly read the article, a minimum viewing time was implemented before they could proceed to the next stage. The exposure duration was either eight or sixteen seconds, depending on the treatment. Respondents were also encouraged to zoom in on the article if needed.

The questionnaire was designed to capture the hypothesized effects. Attitude toward the property was measured as the dependent variable, and perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives were included as the proposed mediators. The manipulation checks were deliberately placed after these main constructs to reduce the risk that participants would be influenced by the checks, which could bias their responses to the focal variables (Söderlund, 2018, pp. 90-91).

Beyond the main causal variables, the questionnaire also included an open-ended question to capture spontaneous reactions. The procedure and results from these responses are later presented in Section 4.5, as this is not part of the main study. Moreover, sport identification was also included in the questionnaire, acting as a control variable. This is because sport identification reflects respondents' general involvement with football rather than anything manipulated in the experiment, but it is likely related to how they evaluate the team and the sponsorship (Chien et al., 2016; Gwinner & Swanson, 2003; Peluso et al., 2019). Following Malhotra's (2020, pp. 524-525) recommendations, control variables can be used to remove extraneous variation from the dependent variable, allowing differences between treatments to be more clearly attributed to the experimental manipulations. After capturing sport identification, an attention-check item and demographic questions were included at the end of the survey. The survey flow is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Visualization of the central construct in the Main Study



3.3.3 Stimuli Development

To ensure that only the intended manipulation differed between treatments (Söderlund, 2018, p. 59), the stimuli consisted of four mock news articles announcing that the fictional Allsvenskan club *Sundhamn IF* had signed a new main sponsor, *Adlar Energy*. The sponsor was manipulated to appear either as a sustainable energy firm or as a Saudi Arabian oil company, while keeping the company name and industry similar across treatment groups to increase internal validity (the extent to which a study has a clear cause-and-results relationship) and control for confounding factors (Perdue & Summers, 1986). In the controversial treatment, the article also stated that the company had previously faced allegations of human rights violations and breaches of environmental treaties, signaling ethical controversy. In the justification conditions, a financial justification quote was also included.

A newspaper format was used, consistent with how prior sponsorship studies commonly employ news-style announcements to enhance ecological validity (Chien et al., 2016; Walzel et al., 2025). Football was selected due to its high salience in Sweden (Andersson, 2025). The four mock articles were designed in *Canva*[1], using a consistent layout and color scheme to resemble a professional news article.

To enhance realism, the layout of the stimuli was refined to eliminate visual artifacts and extraneous cues (e.g., excessive spacing between images and text), ensuring a more authentic presentation and ecological validity (Schmuckler, 2001). Because the pre-study was not conducted with the final set of stimuli, an additional pilot test was performed, similar to the test by Kelly et al. (2016). In this test, the four stimuli were evaluated by a small expert sample (N = 8), where participants rated each stimulus on a seven-point Likert scale ("How realistic do you find the news article?" 1 = not at all realistic, 7 = really realistic). The overall perceived realism was satisfactory, with an average mean score of $M = 5.60$ ($M_{\text{Contro+Just}} = 5.88$, $M_{\text{NonContro+Just}} = 5.38$, $M_{\text{Contro}} = 5.75$, $M_{\text{NonContro}} = 5.38$).

3.3.4 Measures

To capture the effects, several 7-point scale measures were used (see Table 2). In order to capture the *attitude toward the property,* the question "Please indicate your overall evaluation of Sundhamn IF" was asked. The measurement was based on the semantic differential scale developed by MacKenzie and Lutz (1989), using the bipolar adjective pairs (bad-good, unpleasant-pleasant and unfavorable-favorable).

Another key construct, *sponsor-property fit*, was adopted from the established 7-point Likert scale by Gwinner and Bennet (2008). Respondents answered the question "Please indicate how well you think the collaboration between Adlar Energy Group and Sundhamn IF fits (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)". Four items followed: "There is a close fit between Adlar

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[1] Canva: *[https://www.canva.com/sv_se/]*

Energy and Sundhamn IF", "Adlar Energy and Sundhamn IF have many similarities", "It makes sense that Adlar Energy sponsor Sundhamn IF" and "My image of Sundhamn IF is consistent with my image of Adlar Energy".

The perceived motive of the team was measured using the scale developed by Rifon et al. (2004). Consistent with previous research, motives were conceptualized as existing on a continuum from self-centered (egoistic) to other-centered (altruistic) (Ellen, 2006; Forehand & Grier, 2003). The measure captured the perceived motives through the question "How would you describe Sundhamn IF's motives? (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree)". To ensure measurement clarity and reliability, one originally reversed item, "The club does not have a genuine concern for the welfare of its supporters/community," was rephrased by removing the negation. This adjustment follows recommendations to avoid misresponse and reliability issues associated with reverse-coded Likert items (Swain et al., 2008). The other two items were kept constant, however, adapted to the question: "The club accepted the sponsor because ultimately they care about its supporters/community" and "The club really cares about supporting its sport and its community."

Sport Identification was also measured and later used as a control variable in the main analyses. Adapting Gwinner and Bennet's (2008) scale, respondents answered the question "For you personally, how accurately do the following describe football to you? (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)". The following were five items, including "Matters to me", "Relevant", "Valuable", "Means a lot to me", "Of concern to me".

The manipulation check replicated the one used in the pre-study (see Section 3.2). To reduce response fatigue, only the single item measuring perceived controversiality was included, as it showed a strong correlation with consumer perceived ethicality (CPE) in the pre-study. The manipulation check regarding justification yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .79, indicating adequate reliability.

Table 2. Overview of Constructs and Measures

Construct	Item	Source	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude Toward the Property	good-bad pleasant-unpleasant favorable-unfavorable	MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989	$\alpha = .97$
Sponsor-Property Fit	"There is a close fit between Adlar Energy and Sundhamn IF" "Adlar Energy and Sundhamn IF have many similarities" "It makes sense that Adlar Energy sponsor Sundhamn IF" "My image of Sundhamn IF is consistent with my image of Adlar Energy"	Gwinner & Bennet, 2008	$\alpha = .90$
Perceived Motive	"The club accepted the sponsor because ultimately they care about its supporters/community" "The club has genuine concern for welfare of its supporters/community" "The club really cares about supporting its sport and its community"	Rifon et al., 2004	$\alpha = .93$
Sport Identification	Matters to me Relevant Valuable Means a lot to me Of concern to me	Gwinner & Bennet, 2008	$\alpha = .97$

3.3.5 Data Collection and Sample Technique

Data collection was conducted through panel-based convenience sampling, carried out in collaboration with *Norstat*[2]. Participants were randomly selected from the panel database of Swedish adults (18+), and Norstat's standard profiling and quality checks were applied. The overall sampling frame was non-probabilistic, as inclusion was limited to individuals registered in the Norstat panel who opted to participate in the online survey (Malhotra, 2020, p. 362). The data was collected between the 29th of October 2025 to the 3rd of November 2025, yielding 624 responses. This sample size was considered substantial enough for between-groups testing (Malhotra, 2020, p. 359).

[2] Norstat is a Swedish company specializing in market research *[https://norstat.co/sv]*

3.4 Assessment of Validity & Reliability

Validity refers to "the extent to which a measurement in fact measures what it is intended to measure" (Söderlund, 2018, p. 136). Constructs were adapted from established multiple-scale measures reported in peer-reviewed articles, with minimal adjustments to fit the study and ensure content validity. Having multiple measures of a single variable is highly recommended in contemporary experiments, especially when examining psychological reactions, as in this study (Söderlund, 2018, p. 134). Furthermore, to assess the variable's reliability, the extent to which repeated measurements of the same variable yields consistent results, Cronbach's alpha was used. As shown in Table 2, the constructs yielded Cronbach's alphas above .9, well above the recognized threshold ($\alpha > .70$) (Söderlund, 2018, p. 136). This ensured consistency in results.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics & Randomization Check

In total, 624 responses were recorded during the data collection period. After excluding respondents who failed the attention check, indicated that they were younger than 18 years, or did not finish the survey, the final sample consisted of $N = 459$. The four experimental treatments were approximately equally sized, with 111 (24.2%) respondents in the controversial + justification condition, 109 (23.7%) in the non-controversial + justification condition, 119 (25.9%) in the controversial without justification condition and 120 (26.1%) in the non-controversial without justification condition. 455 respondents reported gender; of these, 47% identified as female, 53% as male and <1% as non-binary or preferred not to state their gender. Age ranged from 18 to 86 years, with a mean of 45 years and a median of 44 years.

To assess whether random assignment produced comparable groups, differences in demographics across the four experimental treatments were tested. An ANOVA showed no significant differences in age between treatments, $F(3, 439) = 1.15$, $p = .33$, $\eta^2 = .008$. A chi-square test indicated that gender distribution also did not differ significantly across treatments, $\chi^2(9) = 7.43$, $p = .59$. These results suggest that randomization was successful and that demographic variables were unlikely to confound the experimental effects.

4.2 Manipulation Check

In line with the pre-study, the manipulation checks showed statistically significant differences between groups. Participants in the controversial-sponsor treatment perceived the sponsor as more controversial ($M = 5.73$, $SD = 1.69$) than participants in the non-controversial treatment ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.54$), $t(457) = -17.52$, $p < .001$. Likewise, participants who received a justification perceived the explanation as stronger ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.58$) than those who did not ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.50$), $t(457) = -4.93$, $p < .001$. Taken together, these results indicate that both experimental manipulations were successful.

4.3 Descriptive Statistics of Main Variables

Descriptive statistics for the main continuous variables are reported in Table 3, which presents means and standard deviations. Additionally, Pearson correlations for attitude toward the property, sponsor-property fit, perceived motives and sport identification are presented. This provided an initial view of their descriptives and interrelations. Attitude, fit and motives were all positively and strongly correlated with each other, whereas sport identification showed small but positive correlations with the three focal constructs. Taken together, the correlations among the focal variables were positive and statistically significant, indicating expected associations prior to hypothesis testing.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Correlation Matrix for Main Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	Attitude	Fit	Motives	Sport Identification
Attitude	3.76	1.75	1	.78**	.75**	.11*
Fit	3.12	1.49	.78**	1	.74**	.13*
Motives	3.55	1.60	.75**	.74**	1	.13*
Sport Identification	3.05	1.84	.11*	.13*	.13*	1

Note. $N = 459$ for each variable. $^{**}p < .01$, $^{*}p < .05$

4.4 Hypothesis Testing

Consistent with the theoretical structure of the hypotheses, two complementary classes of analysis were used. First, a 2x2 ANCOVA was conducted on attitude toward the property to test the direct effects of sponsor type and justification (H1-H2). Second, Hayes' PROCESS Model 6 was used to test the indirect and serial effects of perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives (H3-H5). Below are the hypotheses extracted from Section 2.

H1. *Exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor leads to less favorable attitudes toward the property.*

H2. *Providing a financial justification (vs. no justification) moderates the effect of a controversial sponsor (vs. non-controversial) on attitudes toward the property.*

H3. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit.*

H4. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived motives.*

H5. *The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is serially mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives.*

4.4.1 Main Effects

To assess the main effects of the experimental manipulations, a 2 (sponsor type: non-controversial vs. controversial) x 2 (justification: absent vs. present) ANCOVA was conducted on attitude toward the property, controlling for sport identification. This approach adjusts for baseline differences in respondents' general engagement with football and increases the precision of the experimental estimates. Assumptions for ANCOVA were checked. The interaction between sport identification and the experimental factors was non-significant (all $p \geq .58$), indicating homogeneous regression slopes and supporting the use of ANCOVA.

A strong main effect of sponsor type emerged. Participants evaluated the property substantially less favorably when the sponsor was controversial ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 1.61$) than when it was non-controversial (*M* = 4.83, *SD* = 1.14), $F(1, 454) = 289.03$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .389$. Thus, roughly 39% of the variance in attitudes toward the property, after adjusting for justification and sport identification, can be attributed to whether the sponsor was controversial or non-controversial. This provides clear support for H1. In contrast, the main effect of justification was not significant, $F(1, 454) = 1.42$, $p = .235$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$, indicating that providing a brief financial explanation did not influence attitudes toward the property. Likewise, the sponsor type x justification interaction was nonsignificant, $F(1, 454) = 0.16$, $p = .688$, showing that justification did not moderate the attitudinal penalty of announcing a controversial sponsor (see Figure 4). Following the results, H2 is not supported.

Sport identification exerted a small but significant positive effect, $F(1, 454) = 17.16$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .036$, indicating that respondents who are more involved in football evaluated the property somewhat more positively overall, which was adjusted for.

Figure 4. Estimated Marginal Means of Attitude by Sponsor Type and Justification

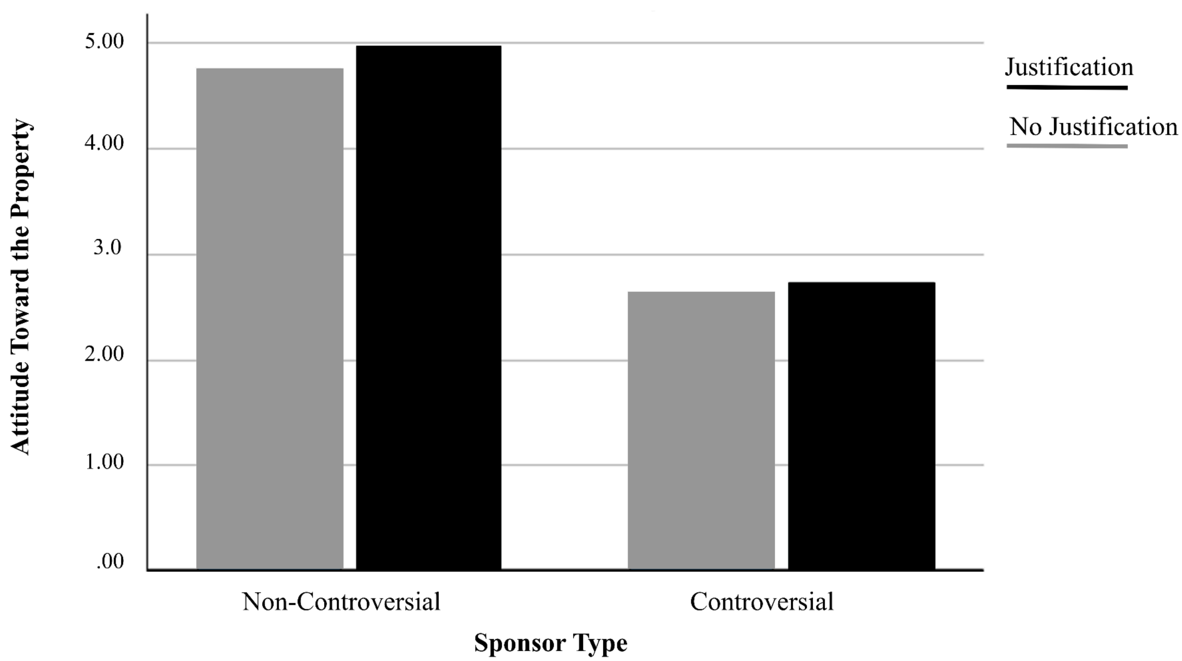


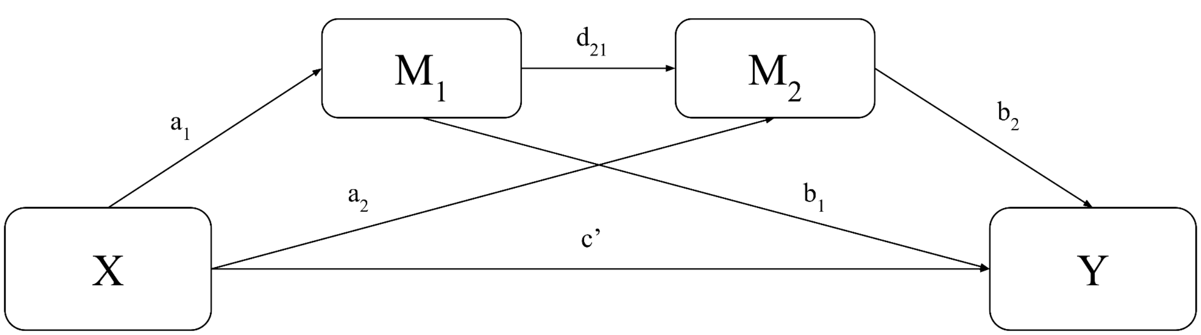
Table 4. Two-way ANCOVA Summary Table

Effect	F	p	partial η^2	Interpretation
Sponsor type	289.03	< .001	.389	Significant
Justification	1.42	.235	.003	Not significant
Sport Identification	17.16	< .001	.036	Small but significant
Sponsor type x Justification	0.16	.688	.000	Not significant

4.4.2 Mediation Analysis

To test the full set of mediation hypotheses (H3-H5), we estimated a serial mediation model using PROCESS Model 6 with 5000 bootstraps. Perceived sponsor-property fit (M_1) and perceived motives (M_2) were specified as ordered mediators and sport identification was controlled for. Justification was not included in the model since H3-H5 concerned only sponsor type and the two mediators, and the ANCOVA in Section 4.4.1 showed no significant effects of justification on attitudes. Conditions were therefore collapsed across this factor when estimating the indirect effects. Sponsor type was coded 0 = non-controversial and 1 = controversial. As seen in Figure 5, the model assesses whether the negative effect of a controversial sponsor (X) on attitudes toward the property (Y) is carried through the two mechanisms of lower perceived fit and, subsequently, less favorable motive attributions. In doing so, it provides estimates of the specific indirect effects via each mediator as well as the sequential indirect effect in which reduced fit lowers perceived motives, which in turn depresses attitudes.

Figure 5. PROCESS Model 6 Visualized Model



Results of the serial mediation model indicated that all existing paths were significant. Exposure to a controversial sponsor reduced perceived sponsor-property fit (a_1) ($b = -1.72$, $p < .001$), and lower perceived fit predicted less altruistic motives (d_{21}) ($b = 0.71$, $p < .001$). Both mediators independently predicted less favorable attitudes toward the property (b_1, b_2) ($b = 0.45$, $p < .001$; $b = 0.40$, $p < .001$). Sponsor type also exerted a smaller but significant direct effect on perceived motives (a_2) ($b = -0.39$, $p = .0017$), showing that sponsor type was significantly related to perceived motives both directly and via perceived fit. The direct effect of sponsor type on attitudes remained significant ($c' = -0.76$, $p < .001$), indicating partial mediation, where attitudes are shaped both directly by sponsor type and indirectly through perceived fit and perceived motives. All individual path estimates are reported in Table 5. Together, the total model consisting of sponsor type, perceived fit and perceived motives explained 71% of the variance in attitudes ($R^2 = .71$).

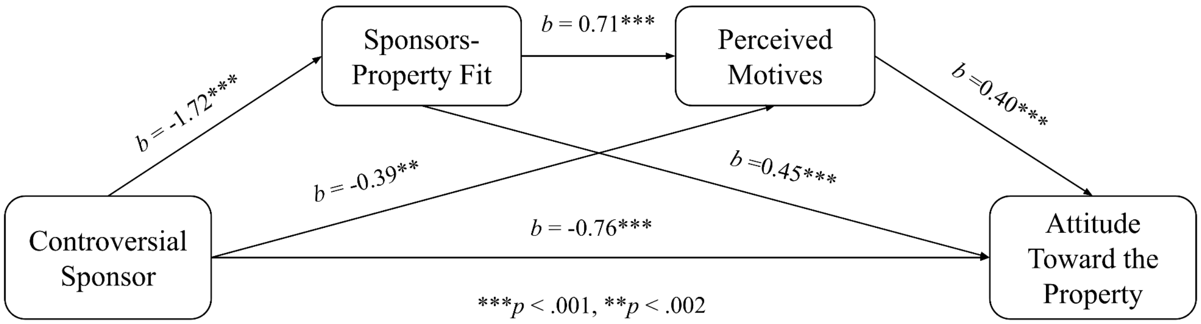
Table 5. Individual Paths (PROCESS Model 6)

Path	Coefficient	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
$X \rightarrow M_1$ (a_1)	-1.72	0.11	-15.25	< .001	[-1.94, -1.50]
$X \rightarrow M_2$ (a_2)	-0.39	0.12	-3.16	.0017	[-0.64, -0.15]
$M_1 \rightarrow M_2$ (d_{21})	0.71	0.04	16.97	< .001	[0.63, 0.80]
$M_1 \rightarrow Y$ (b_1)	0.45	0.05	9.50	< .001	[0.36, 0.55]
$M_2 \rightarrow Y$ (b_2)	0.40	0.04	9.50	< .001	[0.31, 0.48]
$X \rightarrow Y$ (c')	-0.76	0.11	-6.85	< .001	[-0.98, -0.54]

Note. *SE* = standard error; *CI* = confidence interval. Reported coefficients are unstandardized.

To provide a clearer picture of how these mechanisms operate together, Figure 6 illustrates the significant paths through which a controversial sponsor reduces attitudes toward the property.

Figure 6. Individual Paths (PROCESS Model 6)



Finally, the indirect effects through bootstrap analyses were estimated. The indirect effect via perceived sponsor-property fit alone ($X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow Y$) was significant and negative (b = -0.78, 95% *CI* [-1.01, -0.55]), consistent with the prediction that controversy reduces attitudes by lowering perceived fit, supporting H3. The indirect effect via perceived motives alone ($X \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$) was also significant ($b$ = -0.15, 95% *CI* [-0.28, -0.05]), indicating that exposure to a controversial sponsor reduces attitudes in part because it lowers perceived altruistic motives, supporting H4. Importantly, the serial indirect effect, in which controversy lowers perceived fit, which then reduces perceived motives ($X \rightarrow M_1 \rightarrow M_2 \rightarrow Y$), was also significant (b = -0.48, 95% *CI* [-0.65, -0.34]), providing support for H5. Overall, the total indirect was significant (b = -1.41, 95% *CI* [-1.62, -1.21]), indicating that a large portion of the negative impact of a controversial sponsor on attitudes is transmitted through perceived fit and perceived motives rather than occurring solely as a direct backlash. The results are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6. Indirect Effects of Sponsor Type on Attitude (PROCESS Model 6)

Indirect Path	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI	Interpretation
Total Indirect	-1.41	0.10	-1.62	-1.21	Significant
X → M1 → Y	-0.78	0.12	-1.01	-0.55	Significant
X → M2 → Y	-0.15	0.06	-0.28	-0.05	Significant
X → M1 → M2 → Y	-0.48	0.08	-0.65	-0.34	Significant

Note. *BootSE* = bootstrap standard error; *BootLLCI* = bootstrap lower limit confidence interval; *BootULCI* = bootstrap upper limit confidence interval. Indirect effects are considered significant when the confidence interval does not include zero.

4.4.3 Summary of Hypotheses Testing

Table 7. Hypothesis Summary Table

#		Result
H1	*Exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor leads to less favorable attitudes toward the property.*	Supported
H2	*Providing a financial justification (vs. no justification) moderates the effect of a controversial sponsor (vs. non-controversial) on attitudes toward the property.*	Not Supported
H3	*The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit.*	Supported
H4	*The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is mediated by perceived motives.*	Supported
H5	*The effect of exposure to a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor on attitudes toward the property is serially mediated by perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives.*	Supported

4.5 Complementary Findings

To complement the confirmatory findings in Section 4.4, an additional analysis was conducted on the open-ended survey question: "Please write your spontaneous feelings and reactions to the sponsorship (there are no right or wrong answers)". The aim was not to test new hypotheses, but to better understand how respondents interpreted and emotionally framed the sponsorship decision. Open-ended comments are well-suited for this purpose, as they allow respondents to express reactions in their own words rather than choosing among predefined options, which can reveal insights that might otherwise remain hidden (Malhotra, 2020, pp. 151-153). Moreover, the question attracted an unexpectedly high response rate (87% of valid respondents, N = 366), and some comments explicitly linked the scenario to real-world debates introduced in the introductory chapter (e.g., "No good. Have seen the real thing with Falsterbo Horse Show last summer!"). The volume and detail of the responses motivated a systematic analysis of the data. In what follows, this subsection first examines the overall sentiment of the comments and then explores the main themes that emerged across the sample.

Sentiment Analysis

To quantify the overall emotional tone of the open-ended reactions, each comment was first scored using the VADER sentiment algorithm (-1 = very negative, +1 = very positive). VADER is a rule-based sentiment analysis tool that reliably and effectively extracts sentiment polarity scores from text (Hutto & Gilbert, 2014). These sentiment scores were then analyzed as a dependent variable using a 2x2 ANCOVA with sport identification as a control variable. There was a significant main effect of sponsor type $F(1, 358) = 40.53$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .102$, where comments were more positive in the non-controversial treatment ($M = 0.17$, $SD = 0.37$) than in the controversial one ($M = -0.07$, $SD = 0.37$). Neither the main effect of justification ($F(1, 358) = 0.47$, $p = .494$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$), nor the interaction ($F(1, 358) = 0.32$, $p = .573$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$) reached significance. Sport involvement showed a small positive effect on sentiment, $F(1, 358) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .021$.

Overall, this complementary sentiment analysis replicated the pattern in the main analysis. Comments in the controversial condition received more negative sentiment scores, and justification does not meaningfully attenuate these responses. Having established that the open-ended comments mirror the main experimental effects at the level of overall sentiment, the complementary analysis next turns to thematic coding. Since there was no significant difference between the justification conditions, the remainder of the analysis is focused on the difference in treatment groups, controversial or non-controversial.

Thematic Coding

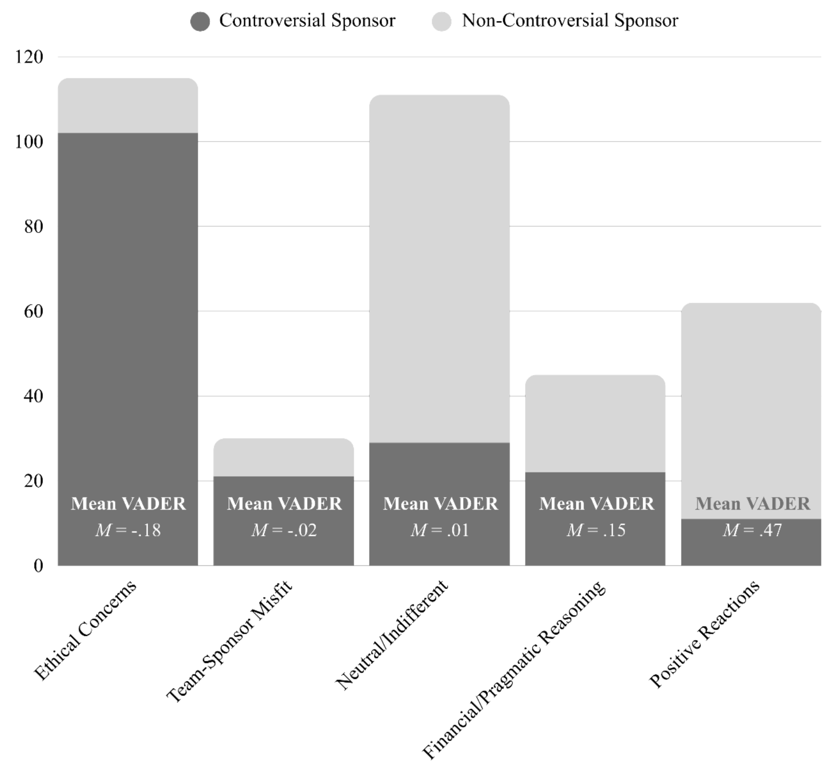
Building on recent methodological advances adopted by Rizzo et al. (2025), the analysis combined (1) manual human coding of a subset of 40 responses with (2) Large Language Model-assisted classification of themes on the full dataset. A brief methodological summary is embedded below since this analysis was not part of the main methodology section.

The procedure went as follows: the two authors independently coded a small subset of 40 open-ended comments to inductively identify recurring interpretive themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Five themes emerged consistently: *Ethical Concerns* (e.g., “Morally very wrong”), *Financial/Pragmatic Reasoning* (e.g., “In the end it all comes down to the club’s need of money”), *Neutral/Indifferent* (e.g., “I have no opinion”), *Positive Reactions* (e.g., “Sounds good to me”) and *Team-Sponsor Misfit* (e.g., “Not the right fit for a football team”). Per the recommendation of Saldaña (2013), the themes were summarized in a codebook (see Appendix B). This codebook was used as a guide to prompt the LLM (Chat GPT 5.1) to assign a theme to each open-ended response (see Appendix C). All outcomes from the LLM were manually assessed by the authors to ensure accuracy. On the whole, thematic analysis is considered to be a qualitative method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Combined with the previous quantitative elements applied, this complementary analysis adopts a triangulation method (Bell et al., 2019, p. 364).

The results from the thematic coding revealed a wide distribution of the 366 respondents across the different themes. *Ethical Concerns* (31.4%) and *Neutral/Indifferent* reactions (30.9%) were the most common, followed by *Positive Reactions* (16.9%), *Financial/Pragmatic Reasoning* (12.3%) and *Team-Sponsor Misfit* (8.5%). A chi-square test showed that the distribution of themes differed significantly across the experimental treatments, $\chi^2(12) = 130.87$, $p < .001$, indicating that the sponsorship framing influenced how participants interpreted the decision. The controversial treatment generated more ethical concern themes, whereas the non-controversial treatment produced more neutral or positive themes. These results are presented in Figure 7.

Connecting the themes to the quantified sentiment scores, a one-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in sentiment across the five themes ($F(4, 361) = 42.49$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .320$). *Positive Reactions* showed the highest sentiment scores ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.24$). The two treatments with the lowest sentiment score were *Ethical Concerns* ($M = -0.18$, $SD = 0.35$) and *Team-Sponsor Misfit* ($M = -0.02$, $SD = 0.36$). The themes of *Neutral/Indifferent* ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.29$) and *Financial/Pragmatic Reasoning* ($M = 0.15$, $SD = 0.29$) fell near the scale midpoint (0). This confirms that the thematic categories map meaningfully onto quantitative sentiment patterns.

Figure 7. Theme Distribution Across Sponsor Type



Note. The bars represent the total number of open-ended responses classified within each theme. Shading indicates the sponsor condition to which respondents were exposed. E.g., within the Ethical Concerns theme, more than 100 of the 115 responses stem from respondents exposed to a controversial sponsor.

Together, the complementary findings confirm that the open-ended responses mirror the main experimental results from the ANCOVA. Participants exposed to a controversial sponsor expressed significantly more negative sentiment, with a higher proportion of comments categorized as expressing ethical concerns. Furthermore, the non-controversial treatment elicited neutral or positive reactions, including pragmatic reasoning. Consistent with the earlier findings, the financial justification did not alter the sentiment scores.

5 Discussion

5.1 General Discussion of Main Findings

Connecting back to the introduction, *the purpose of this study is to examine how announcing a controversial (vs. non-controversial) sponsor affects attitudes toward the sponsored property, and to test whether a brief financial justification shapes this relationship.*

That said, how does announcing a controversial sponsor shape consumer attitudes toward the sponsored property, and can a simple explanation from that property soften negative reactions? The findings provide a clear answer. Announcing a controversial sponsor leads to substantially less favorable attitudes toward the property, confirming the central prediction derived from the idea of bidirectional spillover (Simonin & Ruth, 1998; Till & Shimp, 1998). However, the brief financial justification tested did not reduce this attitudinal penalty, indicating that a simple explanation was insufficient to offset the attitudinal costs at the moment of announcement.

Moreover, the results show that this attitudinal penalty operates through two connected mechanisms. First, controversy lowers perceived sponsor-property fit and impacts attitudes, consistent with expectations from congruity theory (Mandler, 1982; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955). Second, the results revealed that a controversial sponsor led to lower altruistic motive attribution, which in turn impacts attitudes, in line with Kelley's (1973) attribution theory. Third, the results showed that lower perceived fit leads to less favorable motives being attributed to the property. Together, these mechanisms form a sequential pathway whereby noticing a controversial sponsor prompts perceptions of poor fit, which then activates less altruistic motive attributions and ultimately leads to more negative evaluations of the property. These findings directly follow the theoretical mechanisms outlined in Section 2.

Before turning to the theoretical contributions, we consider possible reasons why the financial justification failed to attenuate the attitudinal penalty. As this study is virtually the first to test a possible risk-reducing strategy, reasons behind the outcome are difficult to determine. The null effect contradicts previous literature indicating that justifications could be a plausible communication tactic to mitigate negative attitudes (Benoit, 1997; Crompton, 2014; Peluso et al., 2019). To interpret this discrepancy, the Persuasion Knowledge Model provides a useful theoretical lens (Friestad & Wright, 1994). A reason for the justification not having the intended effect could be that audiences interpret the message as strategic rather than sincere. This can trigger persuasion coping behaviors such as ignoring or counterarguing the message, which in turn undermines the justification's effectiveness.

Overall, the study shows that controversy spills over strongly and reliably onto the property and that audiences' interpretations are grounded in fit- and attribution-based reasoning. Furthermore, the study provides insights that brief financial justifications do not meaningfully change the main evaluative pathway.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to sponsorship and sports marketing literature by shifting attention from sponsor-centered outcomes to how controversial partnerships affect the property at the moment of announcement. These findings extend prior research by integrating congruity theory, attribution theory and crisis communication perspectives into a unified exploratory framework and by testing these mechanisms in a controlled experimental setting.

First, the study advances sponsorship literature by demonstrating strong and consistent property-side spillover effects. Whereas prior research has predominantly focused on how properties influence sponsor outcomes (Gwinner & Eaton, 1999; Simon & Ruth, 1998), far fewer studies have examined the reverse pathway and its consequences for the property (Kelly et al., 2016; Toscani & Prendergast, 2018). By providing causal evidence that controversial sponsors substantially reduce attitudes toward the property at the moment of announcement, this study responds directly to the limited existing research on property outcomes in a sports world where controversial sponsors are highly involved (Jacobs et al., 2025; Maher et al., 2006). This contribution repositions the property not only as a passive carrier of brand meaning but as an active site of reputational brand risk.

The above insight is further strengthened by the complementary analysis, where the open-ended responses revealed interpretive themes that mirror the quantitative results. Ethical concerns dominated in the controversial sponsorship conditions. On the contrary, neutral/indifferent and positive reactions were more in line with the non-controversial treatment. Therefore, this not only strengthens the confirmatory findings but also supports the underlying idea that controversial sponsors are inherently associated with ethical concerns (Crompton, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2025; Peluso et al., 2019).

Second, the findings challenge assumptions in the crisis communication and image-repair literature. Benoit's (1997) transcendence strategy and prior empirical evidence (Peluso et al., 2019) suggest that justifications similar to those used in this study should mitigate the negative effect. However, the present experiment found no such effect. As previously discussed, reasons for this outcome could be attributed to the fact that consumers identify persuasion attempts, thus disregarding the message (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Despite calls for research on risk-reducing strategies in controversial sponsorships (Cornwell & Kwon, 2020), the present findings show that a brief justification does not shift attitudes. While this does not invalidate transcendence strategies outright, it highlights an important condition to consider.

Third, the study contributes theoretically by showing that two core psychological mechanisms operate both independently and sequentially. These two mechanisms are perceived sponsor-property fit and perceived motives. Fit reductions and less altruistic motive attributions jointly explain why controversial sponsors damage the property. This is consistent with predictors from congruity theory (Mandler, 1982; Osgood & Tannenbaum, 1955) and attribution theory (Kelley, 1973). Importantly, the serial mediation result indicates that low fit can trigger more self-serving motive attributions, suggesting that fit serves as a cue that activates attributional reasoning of the property with regard to controversial sponsorships. This complements and extends prior work, which has examined similar paths with attitudes toward the sponsor (Rifon et al., 2004). This study shows that the mediation also takes place when examining attitudes toward the property and interdependently impacts the outcome of aligning with a controversial partner.

Taken together, these contributions deepen theoretical understanding of how controversial sponsorships shape property evaluation and refine existing models of fit and attribution. Furthermore, the findings identify boundary conditions for justification strategies in managing brand risk.

5.3 Managerial Implications

The findings carry several important implications for properties considering partnering with ethically questionable sponsors. First, the substantial attitudinal penalty associated with a controversial sponsor demonstrates that such partnerships should be treated as high-risk brand decisions rather than purely financial. Although sponsorships from controversial industries are recurring in the sports landscape, the risk is still evident (Maher et al., 2006). Properties should therefore consider incorporating reputational risk assessments into sponsor selection processes and carefully weigh the potential brand consequences with the financial gains.

Second, the results revealed that a brief financial justification does not meaningfully improve evaluations of the property. Properties should therefore avoid relying on short, transactional explanations when announcing ethically sensitive sponsorships. Instead, more comprehensive communication strategies may be necessary to reduce the risk that audiences interpret the message as strategically motivated and activate persuasion-coping responses (Friestad & Wright, 1994). This insight is particularly relevant given that the acceptance of controversial sponsors is often driven by financial considerations (Crompton, 2014), yet communicating this rationale does not function as an effective risk buffer.

Third, the mediating role of perceived sponsor-property fit highlights the importance of proactively managing congruence. Since lower perceived sponsor-property fit serves as a cue that triggers worse motive attributions (Rifon et al., 2004; Speed & Thompson, 2000), properties should prioritize sponsors whose values, identities or industry associations align with their positioning. This should help mitigate negative motive attributions and result in more favorable attitudes toward the property.

Fourth, the complementary analysis underscores the value of monitoring early-stage stakeholder reactions. The spontaneous emergence of ethical concerns in the controversial sponsor treatment suggests that public sentiment can shift rapidly at the moment of announcement. Properties could therefore benefit from active sentiment tracking and stakeholder engagement immediately after announcements to detect emerging narratives and respond before negative frames become well established. Once again, the sentiment and thematic analysis underscore the inherent risks of being associated with a controversial partner.

5.4 Limitations and Future Research

Although this study offers valuable insights into how controversial sponsors influence property-side outcomes, it is not without limitations. Acknowledging these limitations is important, as they highlight promising directions for future research. First, the perception of controversy is inherently subjective and culturally bound. As this study relied on a Swedish sample, the findings reflect a specific cultural context where environmental and human rights standards are particularly salient. Consequently, the results may not generalize to markets with different moral frameworks or geopolitical ties. For instance, a Saudi Arabian sponsor might not be perceived as controversial within the Middle East or in regions where economic development is prioritized over the specific ethical concerns tested here. Future research could therefore replicate this study across diverse cultural settings to determine if the negative spillover effects persist globally or if they are unique to Western markets with high ethical sensitivity.

Second, a limitation of this study is the fact that the experiment examined only one type of controversial sponsor. In this case, an oil company linked to human rights and environmental criticism. Controversy can stem from a wide range of sources, including gambling, alcohol, cryptocurrency or political regimes (Bestman et al., 2015; Crompton, 2014; Hing et al., 2013; Jacobs et al., 2025; Kelly et al., 2014), each of which may activate different causal reactions. Therefore, it is proposed that future research compare multiple forms of controversial sponsors to assess whether fit and motive attributions operate similarly across domains or whether specific controversial categories trigger distinct cognitive or moral responses.

Third, while we did test whether a financial justification moderated the main link between sponsor type and attitude, we did not consider how justification might influence the individual paths in the serial mediation model. This was a conscious decision in terms of scope and hypotheses, but future research could examine whether justification produces moderated mediation effects and impacts the mediators proposed in this study.

Fourth, our model specifies that lower fit leads to less altruistic motive attributions, a direction consistent with the view that incongruence triggers a search for causality. While this represents a primary evaluative pathway at the moment of exposure, alternative sequences may exist in different contexts. Future studies could usefully examine these potential feedback loops to further map the complex interplay between cognitive congruence and attributional processes.

Fifth, an additional limitation concerns the use of a fictional team and a fictional sponsor in the experimental stimuli. While this choice prioritized internal validity by eliminating confounds like prior brand familiarity and loyalty, it limits external validity by reducing real-world emotional investment. Reactions to real teams and real controversial sponsors are likely more emotionally charged or influenced by existing beliefs. Future research could therefore replicate the design using real sponsorship announcements or natural field experiments to assess whether the observed mechanisms hold under more ecologically rich conditions. Additionally, scholars could build on our complementary analysis by examining actual social media/forum discussions surrounding recent controversial deals to validate whether the ethical themes identified here persist in non-simulated environments.

Taken together, these limitations suggest multiple avenues for future research. Studies can extend the current findings, refine theoretical models of property-side sponsorship effects and further explore the topic of controversial sponsorships. Properties cannot assume that the benefits of a controversial sponsor will be limited to financial support. Spillover to the team occurs immediately and the consequences can be detrimental. That said, controversy spills over.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Stimulus used in Experiment

Controversial & Justification

LATEST SPORTS NEWS

Adlar Energy Group becomes new main sponsor of Sundhamn IF

Stockholm — 2025

Today, Sundhamn IF announced Adlar Energy Group, **a state-owned oil company based in Saudi Arabia**, as its new main sponsor for the upcoming Allsvenskan season. The company has faced allegations of **human rights violations and breaches of international environmental treaties**.

In an official statement, the club said: "Following financial challenges after the pandemic, Sundhamn IF has partnered with Adlar Energy Group to **secure the funding needed to continue its youth and first-team operations**."

Sundhamn IF players practicing for the next match

ADLAR ENERGY GROUP

Non-Controversial & Justification

LATEST SPORTS NEWS

Adlar Energy Group becomes new main sponsor of Sundhamn IF

Stockholm — 2025

Today, Sundhamn IF announced Adlar Energy Group, **a sustainable energy company focusing on renewable wind and solar energy**, as its new main sponsor for the upcoming Allsvenskan season.

In an official statement, the club said: "Following financial challenges after the pandemic, Sundhamn IF has partnered with Adlar Energy Group to **secure the funding needed to continue its youth and first-team operations**."

Sundhamn IF players practicing for the next match

ADLAR ENERGY GROUP

Controversial & No Justification

LATEST SPORTS NEWS

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Sundhamn IF players practicing for the next match

ADLAR ENERGY GROUP

Non-Controversial & No Justification

LATEST SPORTS NEWS

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Sundhamn IF players practicing for the next match

ADLAR ENERGY GROUP

Appendix B: Codebook for Complementary Analysis

Theme	Explanation	Quote Examples
Neutral/Indifferent	Comments expressing no clear attitude, uncertainty, lack of emotional response or no opinion regarding the sponsor. These comments do not contain evaluative or interpretive content and instead convey disinterest or insufficient knowledge to form a judgment.	“I have no opinion.” “I don’t know.” “No feelings.” “Nothing special.” “No idea.”
Ethical Concerns	Comments expressing moral, political, or values-based objections to the sponsor. Includes concerns about human rights, unethical practices, corruption, exploitation or environmental harm.	“Morally very wrong.” “Oil companies are evil.” “It’s unethical.” “Human rights come first.” “This is clearly sportswashing.” “I think that there under no circumstances are a good reason for a Swedish club in any sports to interact with company with these values and reputations.”
Team-Sponsor Misfit	Comments arguing that the sponsor does not fit the team, sport, league, country or local context. Includes perceived value misalignment, cultural/geographical mismatch, irrelevance, odd pairing or confusion about why this sponsor is connected to this team. Focus is not on morality but primarily on coherence, appropriateness and strategic alignment.	“Not the right fit for a football team.” “They should have sponsors that are more aligned with this sport.” “Very odd for them to sponsor a club in Sweden.” “Strange partnership.” “No clear connection.” “Feels out of place.”
Financial/Pragmatic Reasoning	Comments acknowledging financial necessity, pragmatic acceptance or economic realism. Respondents here may find the partnership strange or imperfect, but justify it because the team needs resources, must remain competitive or because the sponsorship provides vital funding.	“To be able to compete and stay in allsvenska , you need moneyflow from somewehere. and in this case this is an arab company in oil bussines , Even though we don’t share the same views, we have to find common ground.” “If they need the money, why not?” “The club is desperate for money.” “It comes down to their need for funding.” “Ok, money is needed for the youth activities.”
Positive Reactions	Comments expressing positive	“Its really nice to see such a big

	evaluations, approval, enthusiasm or support for the sponsorship. These include statements that view the partnership as beneficial, inspiring, environmentally aligned (for the non-controversial sponsor) or good for the club's development.	football club get sponsored by a company that really wants to help out the environment. Hopefully this can inspire and motivate more companies to take the environmental route" "Very good" "Positive" "It is great" "Sounds good to me."

Appendix C: LLM Prompt used for ssigning themes to open-ended responses

Here are open-ended responses from my experiment. For each row, assign exactly one of the following themes based on the definitions and examples found in the attached codebook:

1. *Neutral/Indifferent*
2. *Ethical Concerns*
3. *Team-Sponsor Misfit*
4. *Financial/Pragmatic Reasoning*
5. *Positive Reactions*

Please respond as CSV with two columns: ResponseId, Theme. I will provide 50 responses at a time.

Appendix D: AI Disclosure

This paper primarily used three AI tools, ChatGPT, Grammarly and SciSpace, in strictly supportive roles. ChatGPT and Grammarly assisted with language polishing (grammar, clarity and flow). ChatGPT was also used to visually generate the logo for the fictional sponsor "Adlar Energy Group" used in the treatment of the research (see Appendix A). As mentioned in our complementary analysis, Chat GPT 5.1 was also used to assign themes of the open-ended responses given, which were later reviewed by us authors. SciSpace complemented our literature searches in Google Scholar and Scopus by providing additional peer-reviewed articles. Typical prompts to ChatGPT focused on readability (e.g., "improve clarity," "tighten this paragraph," "is the red thread clear?").

We are mindful of the risks of relying on generative AI, especially for literature discovery, where paywalled or database-restricted sources may be missed. AI tools primarily paraphrase patterns in existing text and are not substitutes for original theoretical reasoning or creative problem-solving. Accordingly, all elements of the thesis, including research design, theoretical development, data analysis and interpretation, were produced by the authors with AI only supported as a tool rather than a generator. All AI outputs were reviewed and verified by the authors. No AI-generated output was included without substantive human revision, and all cited sources were independently read and assessed before inclusion.