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When stakeholder opinions diverge: a case study of Aberdeen Football Club’s proposed relocation to Westhill

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**ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of Aberdeen Football Club’s proposed relocation from Pittodrie Stadium to the small town of Westhill, seven miles from the city-centre, and to assess the popularity of the proposed move among stakeholders of the club. At the present time, post-lockdown, it appears that the club has abandoned this plan and may move to a new stadium on the seashore near Pittodrie. However, the issues and stakeholder relationships revealed through this case remain worthy of intensive study for what they reveal about the intersection between the corporate world, community organizations, and hardcore supporter bases, and how each works according to a different logic and rhythm as they vie for ascendancy. Overall, questionnaire responses from Aberdeen city-centre (Union Square) shoppers were marginally positive (66.90% for); supporters’ club views were overwhelmingly negative (19.80% for); and Westhill shoppers’ views were largely negative (39.60% for).

**Introduction**

**General introduction**

The aim of this article is to investigate the impact of Aberdeen Football Club’s proposed relocation from Pittodrie Stadium to the small town of Westhill, just over seven miles from the city-centre, and to assess the popularity of the proposed move among stakeholders of the football club. At the present time, it appears that, post-COVID-19-lockdowns, the club has abandoned this plan and are considering a new stadium on the seashore not far from Pittodrie. However, the issues and stakeholder relationships revealed through this case remain worthy of intensive study for what they indicate about the intersection between the corporate world, the community organizations, and the hardcore supporter bases, and how each works according to a different logic and rhythm as they vie for power and ascendancy. During the fieldwork, conducted in 2018–20, the opinions of residents in both Aberdeen and Westhill were canvassed, alongside the views of supporters at one of the popular Aberdeen FC supporters’ clubs located close to Pittodrie. With the relocation being such a volatile topic, the questionnaire results reveal the general attitudes in different locations around the city and offer viable insights into a debate, which has been prominent for almost a decade. By December 2022, it had become clear that the relocation would not go ahead, other than the training pitches which had already been installed.

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Research questions

The research questions are as follows: What were the motivations behind Aberdeen FC’s plans to relocate away from the city and leave the historic Pittodrie Stadium behind? What are the major controversies surrounding the stadium move and how did the club respond in addressing these issues? What are the views and the general attitudes of residents and Aberdeen FC supporters in both Westhill and the city towards the club in this transition? Will Aberdeen FC’s vision for a prosperous future and a successful stadium relocation to Westhill be a reality?

Documented planning permission failures

Although, in the beginning, Aberdeen FC seemed to get its own way, in being granted planning permission, it was a struggle for the club to establish a suitable site for the relocation in the twenty years up to 2020. Scotland was part of a strong bid for the 2008 European Championships and it was indicated to Aberdeen FC that, if that bid were to be successful, the planning and construction of a new all-seater stadium could take place at Bellfield Farm, also (like Westhill) on the western outskirts of the city. However, with Poland–Switzerland’s bid winning the right to host the Championships, Aberdeen FC’s plan fell through. At that time, an opponent of the initial works claimed ‘It is like the lifting of a black cloud over the area’.

Aberdeen FC, and its then owner Stewart Milne, then pinned their hopes on constructing a new stadium at a purpose-built sports centre in Loriston, on the southern outskirts of the city, for the start of the 2014–15 season. Calder Park, the sports-centre, which was to double up as a training facility, and provide finance through letting, failed the application process, thus ending this relocation plan. The discontent about relocating was strong among fans at this early stage and, with political parties such as Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrats all giving the go-ahead to plans in campaigning, it is thought that the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) uncertainty swung the voting in favour of the fans looking to protect Pittodrie (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pittodrie Stadium, Aberdeen (source: author’s camera).
The preferred option for fans has always been the redevelopment of Pittodrie Stadium and the potential to remodel their spiritual home through a state-of-the-art redevelopment. The club has made it clear that it is in its best financial interests to relocate. Some are opposed to redevelopment of Pittodrie due to the implications of partial stadium closures. UEFA regulations state that any construction work taking place on a stand means that the whole stand must be shut in tandem. This could effectively reduce the stadium capacity to 12,000 as the work is being carried out, lasting four to six years, creating huge financial losses and, therefore, placing the club in a survival battle, as well as reducing the chances of on-the-pitch success. It is also well known that a redevelopment of this kind would cost just as much as building a new all-seater stadium such as Kingsford Stadium. The club would lose the benefits of new training facilities, and the club would continue to train on council fields. The move was seen by the club as an opportunity too good to pass up. If the £18 million expected from the sale of Pittodrie was foregone, then the redevelopment of Pittodrie would push the club further into the red.

**Community backlash**

Although there was a seemingly overwhelming benefit of moving to such an impressive structure, there were many objections to the idea, which were consistently prominent in all discourses, with multiple stakeholders loudly declaring their interests and views. Over the years, while Aberdeen FC has strived for a new arena, it has consistently tried to extinguish any stakeholder fears about the ambitious nature of the relocation. The proposed Kingsford Stadium was criticized by Westhill residents for the light and sound pollution that could come with an all-seater stadium in a relatively quiet community and they debated whether the development would actually bring any economic benefits to the town as the club claimed.

There was also severe criticism of the choice of plot for the structure, coming from all angles. The increases in traffic on the roads around the new stadium would have caused mass congestion on the A944, which is a vitally important transport link for many, and which has already had documented problems in that capacity. There were reports that the plot lay dangerously close to two major pipelines, which may not have been accessible for alterations. These problems were the least of the worries for the football club, as it continued to battle environmental activists who campaigned around the simple fact that the relocation was centred on a green belted area (see below) and, therefore, illegal. Although the club managed to wrangle its way through many court battles, in relation to this, the activist movement was one which grew as the stadium plan stuttered, and this created a negative vibe which followed the Kingsford Stadium throughout its life. Of course, the football club still continued to hope that its plans would prevail.

**The Kingsford Stadium project**

In 2016, plans for Aberdeen FC’s new focal point for footballing excellence and new stadium were revealed on land between Westhill and Kingswells on the western outskirts of Aberdeen. By planning a twenty-first century, modernized stadium and training facilities, the club felt that this step would lead to a sustainable future; achievement of higher goals; and maximization of the club’s reach in local communities in the northeast. This was part of an initiative by the club to excel progress on- and off-the-pitch, with stakeholders hoping that the development would provide a wider economic output. The planning documents detailed that, in addition to the stadium, there would have been community 3G pitches installed; a multi-purpose gymnasium; learning zone; an AFC Heritage museum; and over 1,600 car-park spaces.

**Green belted area policy**

Green belt land policy is a significant factor in this case for opposing groups and in particular the West Aberdeen Environmental Protection Association Limited (WAEPAL). A ‘green belt’ is
defined as an area of land in which development is strictly controlled so as to manage the boundaries of a town or city over the longer term. In recreational and amenity terms, green belts play a vital role in different diverse ecosystems, whether they be urban, rural or social regeneration, and will be prominent in the future of planning developments in Scotland. Green belts in Scotland serve to maintain the natural heritage and landscape; and conflicts such as those around Aberdeen FC’s Westhill project are very common around edges of cities in the UK.

Even though it is clear that green belts may have negative economic side-effects, for social and aesthetic reasons, the Scottish government has been very determined to protect landscapes around the country. In more recent times, the policy has been remodelled to ensure that modernization and urbanization can occur in Scotland, while maintaining beloved landscapes and habitats. Glasgow and Aberdeen, in particular, are surrounded by green belts, in relation to which there are strong presumptions against any kind of large-scale development.

Urban fringe areas are ones which often lack identity and consumerism takes advantage of this fact in many countries. In Scotland, in particular, the urban fringe is seen as landscapes not to be touched in order to preserve scenery and habitats important to the local community. The urban fringe serves as a conduit to the main urban area, but many see the landscapes around Aberdeen as "transitional landscapes" possessing a clear functional nature with the potential to host some structures of great economic value such as the Kingsford Stadium. New developments on the fringe can alter the characteristics of the city, and communities around it, a key issue for stakeholders who were worried that Aberdeen as a city would regress due to the economic and environmental impact of the stadium relocation.

**Prior studies**

This review identifies the extant literature in relation to the major arguments for and against Aberdeen FC’s proposed stadium relocation to Westhill-Kingswells. Stadium relocations are ventures which have been renowned for carrying huge risks for any football club and Aberdeen FC is no different, especially with such developments being in the pipeline for over twenty years. Disputes between the supporters, commercial organizations, directors, leagues and clubs are likely in these instances, with stakeholder ethics and organizational legitimacy being the keys to passing such designs. However, conflict may arise from the lack of consensus over club purpose and direction and, although it is common that co-operation occurs, it can be a long-winded process to ensure that the transition to a new modern development takes place. And it is important that no stakeholder is adversely affected to the point of no return.

Although Aberdeen FC was set in its ways, and had begun construction, there was still mass supporter unrest, environmental activist protest, and local community residents and numerous other stakeholder groups looking to halt the project or at least manipulate their way to a more satisfactory outcome. A football stadium is seen as a critical interface for many in a football club’s social world to interact and the supporters are key in co-creating a spectacle within the stadium on match-days while also being the major consumer of the product and main source of income. Pittodrie, to many supporters, is the spiritual home of Aberdeen and it is bewildering that the club was willing to let go of such an iconic stadium. Stakeholder harmony is vital for long-term success and growth of a football club. 'As teams constantly seek new and exciting ways to attract and keep fans, building a new stadium is one method that is virtually certain to increase attendance and raise revenues'.

**Stakeholder theory**

Stakeholder Theory’s goals may be defined as: (1) redistribution of benefits to stakeholders, and (2) redistribution of important decision-making powers to stakeholders. The public has become less tolerant of instances of corporate irresponsibility in recent years and, consequently, firms are under
increased pressure to consider their roles in society and how their business operations affect the nearby environment and community.\textsuperscript{16} To many stakeholders, Aberdeen FC did everything but pay attention to the needs and wants of its local community and it arguably failed to appreciate how its stadium relocation plans, as opposed to simple redevelopment of Pittodrie, would affect residents’ and supporters’ lives. A strategic corporate social responsibility (CSR) approach is vital in securing brand loyalty, corporate reputation, competitive advantage, and improved financial performance.\textsuperscript{17}

Therefore, for sport managers, it is crucial to gain knowledge of how your stakeholder relationships are developing, whether they be with club sponsors, supporters, fans or councils. It is the close attention to Stakeholder Theory, which enables managers to properly strategize and gain the upper hand in their industry into the future. Organizations must ask themselves: what obligations does the organization owe to its current stakeholders; how should its decision-making be oriented to balance its various stakeholders’ interests; and what strategies are its stakeholders likely to employ in both the long- and short-term to try to influence the organization?\textsuperscript{18} While the club wanted to modernize its facilities, it seems that it was not able to really understand the true feeling of discontent of many connected with the club. But whether this discontent has any long-term adverse financial effects on the club remains to be seen.

Rapid commercialization within many sports industries has had a dramatic effect on the management structures of sports organizations. The influence of broadcasting companies, sponsors and other commercial organizations, as well as the financial implications of legal decisions, have transformed relationships between those groups involved in the ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ of sport.\textsuperscript{19} In the context of football clubs, it is pivotal that directors seriously consider multiple stakeholder groups and ensure that main groups, such as supporters, who are also the primary customers, are treated fairly. Engaging in CSR initiatives to identify stakeholders’ demands is the key to keeping the organization’s objectives relevant and achievable.\textsuperscript{20} Failure can result in a rapid loss in support and then a subsequent fall in revenue, effacing the business case for CSR.\textsuperscript{21} Stakeholder groups can be a dangerous force for organizations to face if mistreated. Groups can well complement each other and form strategic alliances to stand up to business decisions which are not fit for purpose, in the overall wider view, increasing the persuasive powers of their claim.\textsuperscript{22} Football teams are an exceptional case for Stakeholder Theory and have unique features. The majority of supporters’ relationships with their club are based on ‘fan equity’ and although there may be occasions that club decisions, such as stadium relocations, cause great distress, their loyalty towards the club will nearly always mean that they continue to provide resources, almost regardless of the club’s activities.\textsuperscript{23}

When a club becomes less attentive to stakeholders’ demands, neglecting the loyalty of fan groups, a stakeholder has the choice of choosing an alternative product (supporting a new club) or expressing their dissatisfaction to the club in the hope that changes occur.\textsuperscript{24} It is important that football club supporters are offered additional obligations to fairness, with their custom being the anchor keeping the club afloat in many cases. Supporters have an emotional undivided attachment to their football club and neglecting this would truly be a case of capitalism consuming football to the point of abyss. However, there will always be varying stakeholder responses to every decision that an organization makes. These responses can facilitate or hamper the club’s ambitions to change and modernize.\textsuperscript{25} Stakeholder Theory posits that ‘the nature of an organization’s stakeholders, their value, their relative influence on decisions, and the nature of the organization are all relevant information for predicting organizational behaviour’.\textsuperscript{26}

The concept of isomorphism in sport management is a crucial one, especially in analysing a club, which wants to relocate stadiums. When facing the same or similar pressures, in this era of modernization of infrastructure in sport, the same stakeholder conflict has arisen in protest time and time again. With regaining legitimacy paramount, isomorphic procedures are undertaken, i.e. analysing other clubs’ struggles and identifying their solutions.\textsuperscript{27} DiMaggio and Powell describe isomorphism as ‘the constraining process which forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same environmental conditions’.\textsuperscript{28} Legitimacy is the fuel which drives successful
organizations today and Stakeholder Theory is directly linked to achieving high levels of legitimacy. Football clubs are undergoing bureaucratization and other organizational reforms to make their organizations more similar to the benchmark after divisive business decisions. This naturally makes football clubs more homogenous in their approaches to stakeholder relationships, with the risk of taking chances with stakeholders too great to gamble with. In the words of DiMaggio and Powell, ‘Organisations tend to model themselves after similar organisations in that field that they perceive to be more legitimate or successful’. 

It is critical to analyse the CSR aspects in this case. Carroll formulated the CSR theory around a pyramid by which a CSR-aware firm should ‘strive to make a profit, obey the law and be a good corporate citizen’. If a stakeholder group is investing money into your business, it is important that you demonstrate positive outcomes from your business results to appease them. Along with CSR comes the ‘reservoir of goodwill’ theory, in which engagement with corporate citizenship activities can be a strategic tool in building reputational capital. Many commentators argued that this stadium development was for the community to be able to thrive under Aberdeen FC’s guidance and that the upgraded facilities would only benefit the local area.

**Alienation from a sense of place**

Football fans are clearly alienated from clubs in many ways. The specific form of alienation examined here is the one proposed by Penny and Redhead. Through investigation of Manchester City’s move to the new Etihad Stadium, these authors discovered that fans lost the sense of place that they had established through many years of attending the club’s original home, Maine Road. Hirst maintained that different geographical spaces, under different social and political conditions, are constructed by sources of conflict and political/social power. He concluded that physical spaces are resources of power and meaning, although the relationship between power and space is complex. Fans experience identity formation within the football stadium; this identity is threatened when clubs relocate to new stadiums.

Clubs and governing bodies argue that these moves are necessary to maintain health and safety regulations. While this is true, authors such as Penny/Redhead and Church/Penny argue that these moves represent further capitalization of football. Clubs are taken out of their spiritual homes and relocated to gentrified stadiums for the purpose of increasing the number of seats for sale. Lawrence states that football fans place a significance upon grounds not unlike the religious significance placed upon a church (see also Ramshaw and Gammon). All three articles – Penny/Redhead, Church/Penny, and Lawrence – agree that sport, particularly football, is hugely important in the construction and reproduction of individual and collective identities in modern society.

Bairner and Shirlaw argue that traditional football stadiums in Northern Ireland are also used in the creation of identities and traditions, of both club and community. These authors find that Windsor Park (the home ground of Linfield FC) provides the physical space for an imagined Ulster amongst young working-class men. In a sense, it provides a way for these men to live out a fantasy of a political and social ideal that many in Northern Ireland desire. Given the current political situation in Northern Ireland, and current climate of inclusion and political correctness, a purely Protestant Northern Ireland is impossible. Supporters of Linfield FC find Windsor Park to be a utopia, where they can, for a few hours each week, live within the imagined political dynamics that they desire.

The significance placed upon football stadiums by supporters has, unfortunately, exposed them to further alienation in the Marxist sense. The commercialization of football, according to Potter, has resulted in football undergoing a process not unlike the industrial revolution. As clubs generate more and more financial wealth, the desire to maximize surplus-value has resulted in the construction of new stadia throughout the country. Potter, along with Penny/Redhead, finds that football clubs use new stadiums as a tool to generate new sponsorship, such as the naming of the Emirates Stadium, which resulted in Arsenal FC earning millions of pounds in advertising rights from Emirates Airlines. Advertising is rife within the stadiums themselves, according to Potter, as fans are
bombarded with merchandise and betting establishments and it is the clubs which mostly benefit from the fans’ consumption.41 Fans who previously formed a sea of people within stadiums, choosing to stand in the same areas with the same people each week, now find themselves confined to specific seats and usually on season tickets. Again, they become unable to express themselves as supporters as new rules have banned traditions such as standing, singing and loudly cheering on their team.

**Topophilia and topophobia**

Gaffney defines topophilia (love of a place) and topophobia (fear of a place) in terms of the meanings the Buenos Aires soccer fans began to assign to areas of their team’s stadium after Argentine football moved from British to Spanish control.42 Masculine identities were developed and tested out as groups of men lay claim to particular spaces within a stadium and defended these spaces against rival fans and others. The place became inscribed with power as collective identities developed. As such, working-class history emerged as spaces and events became part and parcel of an emerging club folklore. In Aberdeen, the Aberdeen Soccer Casuals (ASC) was the first and most organized ‘casual’ hooligan firm in Scotland in the first half of the 1980s, before their dominance was challenged by Hibernian’s Capital City Service (CCS) in the middle of the decade.43 Formed to protect Aberdeen fans from travelling ‘Old Firm’ supporters in Aberdeen, the ASC then made collective raids against southern cities’ stadiums, holding their own against much larger numbers in Glasgow if you include opposing ‘scarfer’ fans as well as casuals. Fuelled by Aberdeen’s on-field success in Scotland and Europe, and the burgeoning oil industry’s prosperity, the ASC created a type of grassroots collectivist legacy that older fans may still nostalgically recall today, even in these politically correct times. The club and fans have always had ambition. Topophobia, meanwhile, could refer to fear of entering a rival team’s stadium and district, due to fears of violence, and perhaps fear of one’s own stadium being demolished or changed beyond recognition.

While Edensor, Millington, Steadman, and Taucharungroj write, citing Giulianotti, that ‘traditional fan class-structures shift and blur’, this may be less true in Scotland, where football remains a vital aspect of working-class identity, than in EPL.44 In the West of Scotland, the sport is divided along ethnic, political, and religious lines (Celtic-versus-Rangers), while these clubs cast their shadow over the East of Scotland too. Less dependence on TV broadcasting money by clubs, relative to England’s EPL, means that traditional fans carry more weight, even from the clubs’ viewpoint. Merchandise is often bought by Old Firm supporters to show political/ethnic/religious allegiance, and these purchases are made by traditional supporters as well as the minority of consumerist fans. Smaller teams outside Scotland’s Big Five rarely attract over 5,000 average attendances and support remains very local and traditional. Football club allegiance is a vital part of a supporter’s overall identity and changing clubs is regarded as morally unacceptable. These attitudes continue to persist.

**Football stadia and the tourism experience/toponymic commodification**

In recent empirical work, Edensor et al. studied 28,298 TripAdvisor reviews of the 44 football stadia in the English EPL and Championship (2019–20 season).45 This research confirms previous findings about how stadia function as experiential sites of pilgrimage and heritage. Also, restaurants feature prominently in tourist expectations and enjoyment (a related example here would be the hotel built into the grandstand wall at Czech First League club SK Slavia Prague) as do various other prosaic and functional aspects that add to visitors’ experience. These authors suggest four dimensions of football stadia tourism experiences: stadium as museum, pilgrimage site, event venue, and restaurant. This article goes beyond the single case study approach and the match-day experience46 to a large sample and sophisticated quantitative methods designed to find dimensions relevant to many visitors.
A related topic area is toponymic commodification, including the selling of stadium naming rights. This topic is explored by Rose-Redwood, Sotoudehnia, and Tretter who study the processes at Dubai Metro and City of Winnipeg. Brands become destinations and the physical space of the stadium or urban infrastructure is able to generate further economic rents to help to fund its initial construction, maintenance and operations. These authors write how the built environment is reshaped in terms of the symbolic capital associated with place being transformed into economic capital associated with place. Significantly, the economic value of the named place triumphs over other non-monetary values assigned to the site previously, including previously hegemonic names of club legends, or the suburb or road name (Elland Road in Leeds, for example). Woisetschläger, Haselhoff, and Backhaus studied 798 soccer fans using logistic regression and found, not surprisingly, that fan/regional identification and attitude towards commercialization, contribute to higher fan resistance towards the sale or lease of stadium naming rights to commercial concerns by clubs. To cite these authors, ‘As the sponsoring company takes over control and imposes a “threat” (the change of a stadium’s name) on the group’s ritual place, this results in strong negative emotional reactions’. One crucial point is that sponsorship fit is important in gaining acceptance, such as in the 1980s when work-wear manufacturer Hard Yakka (Australian slang for ‘hard work’) sponsored Collingwood Football Club in Australian Rules football. We find with our Pittodrie Bar sample of hardcore fans a negative reaction to stadium relocation, consistent with this naming rights article.

Materials and methods

As previously stated, the main research aim of this study was to identify and explore the key stakeholder reactions to Aberdeen FC’s stadium relocation to Kingsford Stadium, whether that be from club officials, supporters, residents or environmental activists – it was important to ensure that a diverse spectrum of stakeholder opinions was recorded so as to increase the reliability of the findings. To a large extent, an inductive research approach was applied, with the researcher (first-mentioned author) gaining a stronger and more nuanced understanding of the issues by travelling to Aberdeen and exposing himself to the public mood.

Research approach

Quantitative data are data which are gathered in a numerical form which is then appropriately measured, categorized and compared against other numerical data gatherings as part of the interpretation process. Using three questionnaires, distributed to various diverse demographics, the results will be presented in the Results sections of this piece aided by graphical and/or tabular presentations.

We distributed three questionnaires, one to each of three different, diverse demographics. One questionnaire was given to shoppers in Aberdeen City Centre. These were either neutrals or less committed Aberdeen FC fans who simply wanted to see the club recapture its glory days so as to bring pride back to the city. Aberdeen is the only club from Scotland to win two different European trophies, but has been unable to take the league title away from the Old Firm (Celtic and Rangers) since the 1980s. The second questionnaire was filled out by mostly hardcore Aberdeen FC supporters – the questionnaire was given out on a weeknight at a supporters’ club, The Pittodrie Bar. The third questionnaire was distributed to Westhill/Kingswells residents who shopped in the area near to the proposed stadium. A reasonable sample size of over 90 individuals was obtained for each of the three questionnaires.

Research design

Questionnaire 1 – Union Square Shopping Centre

The first questionnaire was distributed in Union Square Shopping Centre in Aberdeen. The questionnaire was designed to gain the opinion of your average Aberdeen resident, not
necessarily an Aberdeen FC supporter. The research was conducted partially on a Saturday afternoon, thus ensuring that the shopping centre would be busy to really generate a strong and varied set of responses. To ensure that the questionnaire was simple for participants, the questionnaire was circulated in paper form. Participants filled out individual sheets before passing them back to the researcher. Later, the researcher entered the results into a database.

This method required the researcher to travel to Aberdeen and conduct the sampling in person. Using a rough approximation of a random sampling method, the researcher approached various shoppers and asked them to take part in the questionnaire. With the shopping centre at peak-time, the questionnaire was relatively successful, returning a sample size of 124 respondents. Despite the fact that some respondents were not football fans, no entries were excluded as some key opinions on the overall likely effects of the relocation were gained.

The questionnaire asked nine main questions so as to understand the key reasons why this demographic was either mostly for or against the relocation. For space reasons, only answers to a limited number of questions are reported here. The questions asked were firstly age, gender, and extent of support, moving on to location-specific questions.

**Questionnaire 2 - Pittodrie Bar Aberdeen Supporters Club**

A second questionnaire was distributed in The Pittodrie Bar in Aberdeen City Centre, a huge supporter club link and base for many Aberdeen FC fans in the city. On the Monday night of his trip, he (first author) was invited to the Pittodrie Bar in Aberdeen City Centre to conduct a questionnaire on these Aberdeen FC supporters’ views about the stadium relocation.

With Monday Night Football being shown on the TV, the pub was busy, with many supporters actively seeking to have their views heard through the questionnaire. The questionnaire was relatively successful and returned 91 responses over the course of the evening. It was these results which really made a breakthrough in this research, revealing the main opinions of arguably the most important stakeholders affected by leaving Pittodrie behind.

**Questionnaire 3 - Westhill shoppers (Ashdale Drive)**

The third questionnaire provided an insight into the feelings of the residents of the community Aberdeen FC planned to move into. This questionnaire was designed to gauge the opinions of shoppers at Westhill and to gain an insight into the local atmosphere surrounding the then proposed Aberdeen FC stadium relocation. The researcher travelled to Westhill with paper copies of the questionnaire to gain an accurate reflection of the diverse optimism and discontent. He surveyed on a Sunday, a Monday, and a Tuesday. These were not particularly busy periods to conduct the research and extensive patience was required on these days. As the stadium was to be constructed on the outskirts of the town of Westhill, the surveying was conducted on Westhill Drive, located next to a small shopping complex; then completed on Ashdale Drive on the requisite side of the complex. With 106 responses, the questionnaire was relatively successful, considering the fact that the surveying was partially completed on a Monday afternoon.

**Results and findings: location 1 - Union Square Shopping Centre**

The aim of this section is to analyse and interpret the results gained for Questionnaire 1 involving the demographic of shoppers at Union Square Shopping Centre in Aberdeen City Centre. This questionnaire was given out to shoppers by the first-mentioned author in person on 29 September and 18 November 2019.
Background questions

The following subsection contains information about the participants’ backgrounds.

Q1 - age

The age variable leans heavily towards the 25–54 range with the three age bands accounting for 61.29% of the sample (see Table 1). With the questionnaire taking place at a shopping centre on a Saturday afternoon, the high percentage of middle-aged respondents was consistent with our prior expectations. Possibly extending the surveying time into the later evening would have ensured a wider spread in ages, including capturing more of the younger demographic.

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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

Q2 - gender (self-reported)

With the questionnaire taking place at a shopping-centre, a slight skew towards women was expected. However, there was a strong imbalance in this case to the point that 62.90% of all respondents were women (see Table 2). However, the clear majority of Pittodrie Bar respondents were men, for example, so there is some balancing-out.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>62.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Q3 - how involved are you in supported Aberdeen Football Club?

In this particular setting, the researchers expected to encounter more participants who do not attend Aberdeen FC matches in comparison with the other locations targeted in the study. With 65 respondents (52.40%) of the study having no interest in attending matches, this outweighed the cumulative respondents of home and away goers, season-ticket-holders, and supporters who attended most or occasional home games (46.80%) (see Figure 2 and Table 3). This allowed the researchers the opportunity to gauge the opinion of those who don’t have a strong attachment to the football club among the local community. Using Giulianotti’s theory, this sample contains a mix of hot, cool, traditional, and consumerist fans. It is impossible to know the proportion of consumerist-versus-traditional fans as we collected no data on merchandise purchases.
Attitudes towards Aberdeen FC’s stadium relocation

Q4 - are you as an individual for or against the relocation to Westhill and what is the key factor influencing your opinion?

As in all questionnaire locations, the respondent was asked for her/his/their initial feelings on whether she/he/they was for or against Aberdeen FC’s proposed move to Westhill. In Union Square, there was a mostly positive response for the relocation with 66.90% of respondents for the relocation while a quarter of the surveyed shoppers (25.80%) rejected the move (Table 4).

Results and findings: location 2 - the Pittodrie Bar

The aim of this section is to analyse and interpret the results gained for Questionnaire 2 involving the demographic of supporters’ club members and general Aberdeen FC supporters at The Pittodrie Bar, which is situated around two hundred yards from Pittodrie Stadium. The surveying process was conducted in person by the first author on Monday night, 30 September and Wednesday night, 20 November 2019.
Background

Q1 - age
The questionnaire starts by identifying the age bracket of the respondent. With the questionnaire taking place in a location such as The Pittodrie Bar, it was assumed that the age range would not be diverse. However, this was proven to be the case in relation to gender but not in relation to age (see Table 5). Although there were no Under-18 respondents due to the timing of the meeting, the author was advised that children travel with the supporters’ club on match-days. Although most age brackets were represented in reasonable numbers (over 10% of the total), it was still an older demographic, on average, with the 45–54 and 55–64 categories having the largest number of respondents (19 or 20.9% each). As such, socially-conservative views were expected.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5. Age distribution, Pittodrie Bar.</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18–24</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>13.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>65–74</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Over 75</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Information Undisclosed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q2 – gender
Gender was a relevant questionnaire question and it was interesting to the researchers to see how many differences there were between the gender spreads at different locations in the study. Unsurprisingly, there was an overwhelming percentage of men at The Pittodrie Bar with men being 91.20% of the total respondents (see Table 6). This gender predisposition is perhaps assumed by many to be obvious. However, it might have been possible for the researchers to have accessed more women respondents if the surveying process had taken place on a match-day.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 6. Gender distribution, Pittodrie Bar.</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Information Undisclosed</td>
<td>0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q3 - how involved are you in supporting Aberdeen Football Club?
In the previous questionnaire in Union Square, there were more opinions received from those who do not attend Aberdeen FC games or maybe attend only the occasional fixture. To diversify the research, it was therefore vital that information was obtained from a location which would have many hardcore Aberdeen supporters who lived and breathed the club. The Pittodrie Bar provided this, with 73.60% of respondents being at least season-ticket-holders and over half of the respondents travelling home and away with the pub’s supporter club (see Figure 3 and Table 7). Only 2.2% of the respondents did not have any interest in attending matches. Therefore, we conclude that most respondents would be ‘hot’ and ‘traditional’ fans using Giulianotti’s theory.
**Attitudes towards Aberdeen FC’s stadium relocation**

**Q4 - are you as an individual for or against the relocation to Westhill and what is the key factor influencing your opinion?**

The most important questionnaire question asks whether the respondent is for or against the relocation and this question was asked consistently across all three locations. For Union Square’s demographic, a clear majority of 66.90% were for the relocation. However, this strongly contrasts with The Pittodrie Bar results, where 78.00% of the respondents were against the proposal (see Figure 4 and Table 8), and, with the majority being key stakeholders of the club, it is a telling statistic that Aberdeen FC’s aspirations were not mirrored within its hardcore support.

We computed the Mann-Whitney U Test to test for whether the distributions could have been identical between each possible pair of locations. Comparing Union Square and Pittodrie Bar, the W statistic was 8590 and the \( \rho \) statistic was 1.635125e-13, which is equivalent to twelve zeros after the decimal place. The \( \rho \) value ranges between 0 and 1 and extreme values indicate complete
separation of the distributions, while 0.5 indicates complete overlap. We conclude that there is not complete overlap of the distributions at a 95% confidence level. The Mann-Whitney was computed on the website https://astatsa.com/WilcoxonTest/

Results and findings: location 3 - Westhill

The aim of this section is to analyse and interpret the results gained for Questionnaire 3 involving the residents in the small town of Westhill, which was the relocation destination for Aberdeen FC’s planned project. The section is divided into three different subsections relating to the questions asked to the residents on 29 September and 19 November 2019.

Background

Q1 - age
The researchers felt that, in the case of Westhill, it was important to be able to sample a diverse age range of respondents to ensure that the past, present and future generations could be represented on a project which would have had an everlasting effect on their community. Compared to other locations, there was an Under-18 presence in the questionnaire with 16.00% of the responses contributed by that category (see Table 9). There was an even spread, with categories 1 to 6 having at least 13 respondents each (12.30%). The spread obtained ensured that the whole community was heard as opposed to just specific age brackets.
Q2 - Gender
Although unplanned, the researchers obtained gender data which was a very even spread with 45.30% of the questionnaire being men and 50.00% being women (see Table 10). The other 4.70% was accounted for by the fact that ‘Information Undisclosed’ was included in the questionnaire and five respondents chose not to include their gender identity. Having an even gender spread, such as this, offers a more well-rounded set of respondents as opposed to the previous locations which had a strong leaning one way (Union Square; 62.9% Women, Pittodrie Bar: 92.1% Men).

Q3 - how involved are you in supporting Aberdeen Football Club?
As for the researchers, it was very interesting to really understand, out of the community of Westhill, who were true stakeholders of the club and who were really invested in the club. 67.00% (two-thirds) of the respondents answered category 5, which was that they did not attend matches (see Table 11). Only 21.60% of the Westhill shoppers surveyed at least attended occasional home games (categories 1 to 4) and hence were active stakeholders in Aberdeen FC.

**Attitudes towards Aberdeen FC’s stadium relocation**

Q4 - are you as an individual for or against the relocation to Westhill and what is the key factor influencing your opinion?
Questionnaires in previous locations painted different pictures as to whether the demographic was for or against the relocation. Union Square’s questionnaire recorded 83 respondents (66.90%) for the move (see Table 12). However, Pittodrie Bar’s questionnaire suggested a contrast with only 19 respondents (19.80%) supporting Aberdeen FC’s vision. There was a slightly more balanced opinion in Westhill, although there was still a majority of respondents against the relocation, with 55.70% being against (59) and 39.60% being for (42).
Two Mann-Whitney U tests were performed using this sample. In comparison with Union Square, the W statistic was 8552 and the \( \rho \) value was 0.000008, which still leads us to conclude that the two distributions were completely separate, but slightly less so than the case cited earlier involving Union Square and Pittodrie Bar. This result is interesting as both Union Square and Westhill samples were shoppers at shopping centres, and yet the significant differences in responses suggest that Westhill shoppers were much more dissatisfied with the stadium relocation than were Union Square shoppers. The Mann–Whitney test for Pittodrie Bar and Westhill showed the smallest difference in distributions, with W being 3747 and \( \rho \) being 0.001125. Interestingly, two demographics that appear to have little in common, Pittodrie and Westhill, nonetheless, were to some extent, united in their opposition to the Westhill project.

**Discussion**

The interesting results presented here suggest an extreme diversity of views about a stadium relocation across three demographic groups all based in Aberdeen or surrounds. This case reflects modern Western society where people are more educated, informed and articulate than in previous generations, and they will express positions forcefully and vocally on issues that they care about. Although not discussed at length here, the persistence, clout and strategic and tactical ingenuity and integrity of the various environmental and community groups were a surprise to us and no doubt to the Aberdeen Football Club hierarchy too. These groups were informed on the issues and used expertise and networks accumulated via both people’s day jobs and community connections to forcefully rebut and contest the club’s plans.

The case shows the power of supporter groups expressing dissent and this has the power on occasion to derail corporate agendas especially if fans’ views are shared by other groups, such as environmental groups, whether they officially work together or not.

A tentative conclusion is that the club, whether operating out of sport management culture or more traditional sporting mindsets, probably believed that it had the right and responsibility to choose its own stadium plans; it expected perhaps some opposition in the planning process, but probably did not expect the sophistication and resilience of the opposition that emerged. The seafront location is a good working compromise as it will deliver a new stadium in a place not too far from the traditional home turf. Moves a small distance, such as that of Millwall to the New Den, tend not to overwhelm or anger supporters. An unpublished Honours dissertation by Dylan James reveals more supporter satisfaction at Tottenham than at West Ham United largely due to the new stadium being built on the old stadium’s site in Tottenham’s case.55

The late Eric Dunning once criticized the ethnographic work of Gary Armstrong who studied the hooligan culture of Sheffield United’s Blades.56 Dunning claimed that Armstrong failed to fully appreciate the reality of Sheffield as a two-team city. The fact that Aberdeen is traditionally seen as a one-team city, despite the recent rapid rise of Cove Rangers up through the Scottish leagues, is a significant factor in our case. It contributed arguably to the extreme self-confidence of the club management and the fact that it underestimated the opposition it would receive. Due to Aberdeen’s remoteness from other Scottish cities, the drama played out with a minimum of outside

### Table 12. Relocation opinions, Westhill.

<table>
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<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Against</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Information Undisclosed</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interference, or even interest, thus allowing us to fully observe the intricacies of a contested situation that really only involved participants from within the city itself and surrounds. The case would be interesting as a classroom lecture example or assignment topic as the moves and strengths of the various protagonists ebbed and flowed over a long time period and the final outcome remained uncertain for a long while. And, for football traditionalists, the outcome, which sees Westhill ruled out, will be a heartening one.

Conclusion

General conclusion

Aberdeen FC made it fundamentally clear, in conversation with the first author, what the key motivations were behind the relocation. The club acknowledged its role in the local community and looked to pioneer the way in terms of providing facilities to not only the people of the northeast but also its youth and senior sides who at that stage trained on council parks. The move would have modernized the club and elevated it in stature as it looked to compete in the Scottish domestic game. Future generations could have built on this ambition and, once again, achieved the success that the club has strived to recapture for the past thirty years.

Although the club saw this project as having endless promise and benefit, there was mass controversy surrounding the stadium move. Investigating different stakeholder opinions, the major downfalls of the planning were the occupation of green-belted land, which is considered illegal, and the destruction of the local economy as a result of the club moving the stadium away from the city-centre. The local economy has been on a downturn for a decade and the additional pressure applied by this venture would have only caused further problems. In this study, it was found that potential hooliganism increases were not welcomed in the Westhill area and the transportation implications (bringing fans in by shuttle bus) made the logistics problematic to say the least. The club maintained that its site for construction was perfectly legal while promoting many potential match-day measures to ease transportation pressures including shuttle buses and bypass redevelopment. In terms of the economy, this is out of the club’s hands and it is the city of Aberdeen and its people who are responsible for stepping up and investing.

There was proven to be a strong distaste towards the idea of a relocation from committed Aberdeen FC supporters. The research, partly conducted at The Pittodrie Bar, dramatically captured the discontent about the abandonment of the spiritual home of Pittodrie for a structure seven miles outside the city-centre. The residents of Westhill understood the obvious benefits of upgrading facilities, but many were repelled by the idea of football and the potential trouble it could bring, whether it be hooliganism or traffic congestion. The football club had to prove to the local community of Westhill that it would have accommodated their concerns, modifying a successful transport network to handle influx of supporters and promising that they would not overpower its small community, leaving none of its defining factors intact.

Football clubs are non-existent without the support of the fans and the betrayal felt by many supporters, because of their view that the club went behind their backs and did not listen to feedback, could be costly. Aberdeen FC is a huge club and, if it was to get its stakeholder management done correctly, it would be well on its way to becoming a major power in the domestic game and potentially tasting European success once again.

Limitations

Gaining access to questionnaire respondents in Union Square and Westhill locations was difficult. There was the potential for more diverse respondents and results if other locations had been added. Furthermore, excluding The Pittodrie Bar, it was a challenge to achieve sufficient responses while at
the same time ensuring that the majority of participants were in fact stakeholders and/or supporters of Aberdeen Football Club. If there was a way to organize focus groups, in all three locations, that would have further validated the results.

One ethical conundrum associated with this project was the first researcher’s pragmatic decision to mask the club which he supported (Rangers FC). With Aberdeen FC supporters despising Rangers, it may well have been the case that the targeted supporters would have been unresponsive in permitting surveying opportunities, or might have mocked the exercise. Instead, the research was undertaken with all parties being under the impression that the researcher’s club was Paisley-based St Mirren. After discussion, the second author supported the first author’s decision at the time, for the reasons outlined, but this was not an easy decision to make, as it meant telling untruths, and we are still not completely comfortable with it. As it turned out, the first author was frequently asked which club he supported.

**Suggestions for further research**

One idea would be to interview business owners in the vicinity of Pittodrie about the likely effects of relocation on their revenues and profits. This interview process, and the current survey, could be repeated two and/or five years after any relocation to provide means of *ex post* comparison. Other studies could focus on actual or proposed stadium relocations in Scotland, England or Europe. Although construction has started, Everton fans could be surveyed about the new waterfront stadium. An issue sometimes raised in the Dundee context (but rarely by Dundonians) is whether the two Dundee clubs should merge and, if so, where they could play. A new stadium on the urban fringe would be one possibility (and for Dundee FC going it alone). In that particular context, issues raised here about green-belted land could be important.

**Notes**

2. Ibid.
3. Lloyd and Peel, “Green Belts in Scotland.”
6. See note 4 above.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
17. Walters and Tacon, “Corporate Social Responsibility.”
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 570.
20. Ibid.
22. Neville and Menguc, “Stakeholder Multiplicity.”
23. See note 17 above.
27. Cousens and Slack, “Field-Level Change.”
29. Peacheys and Bruening, “An Examination.”
32. Panton, “Football and Corporate Social Responsibility.”
33. Mahon and Wartick, “Dealing with Stakeholders.”
34. Penny and Redhead, “We’re Not Really Here.”
35. Hirst, Space and Power.
36. Penny and Redhead, “We’re Not Really Here’; Church and Penny, “Power, Space and the New Stadium.”
37. Lawrence, “We are the Boys;” Ramshaw and Gammon, “On Home Ground?”
40. Ibid., Penny and Redhead, “We’re Not Really Here.”
41. See note 39 above.
42. Gaffney, Temples of the Earthbound Gods, 140.
43. Allan, Bloody Casuals, 55, 75, 85, 101; James, Book Review of Congratulations, You have just met the Casuals; McCall and Robb, After the Match, 38–9, 41, 53, 113, 222, 225; Rivers, Congratulations, 5, 16, 232.
45. Edensor et al., “Towards a Comprehensive Understanding.”
46. Ibid., 229, 231.
47. Rose-Redwood, Sotoudehnia, and Tretter, “Turn Your Brand.”
48. Ibid., 849.
49. Woisetschläger, Haselhoff, and Backhaus, “Fans’ Resistance.”
50. Ibid., 1487.
51. Ibid., 1491.
52. Johnson and Christensen, Educational Research.
54. Ibid.
55. Dylan James, The Relocation of Both Tottenham and West Ham.
56. Dunning, Sport Matters, 141; Armstrong, Football Hooligans.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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