“Unsponsoring football”: Sign value, symbolic exchange and simulacra in a gambling-related marketing campaign

This article utilises Baudrillard’s (1981/1994; 1981/2019) concepts of sign value and symbolic exchange to examine the “Unsponsoring Football” campaign which was designed by the marketing and creative agencies VCCP and Octagon, and carried out in conjunction with the bookmakers Paddy Power. Clubs were “unsponsored” by Paddy Power, which paid for the right to not display its logo on football shirts. The campaign concept involved “spoof” shirts which are simulations of the “real” items. A four step process through which the simulacra develop is outlined in the article. The campaign parodies UK government policy on gambling-related sponsorship, which has been criticised for its failure to regulate what is a globalised market. The 2023 White Paper “High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age” is notably similar to the parodic position taken in “Unsponsoring Football”. Removing some elements of sponsorship while retaining a wider relationship with the gambling industry means that the gamblification of the sport remains in place.

Introduction

On 27th April 2023, the UK Government launched a white paper titled “High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age” (UK Government 2023, CP835). The white paper focusses on a wide range of gambling-related reforms, including sponsorship of sport organisations by the gambling industry. The relationship between the gambling industry and professional sport is an ongoing area of controversy, as a number of scholars have outlined in their work on gambling and societal harm (for example Banks and Waters 2023; Sharman 2022; Jones et al 2020; Bunn et al 2019). As Thomas et al (2023) discuss however, shirt sponsorship is the only area of marketing and sponsorship within sport that the white paper addresses. The English Premier League (EPL) have agreed that by the end of the 2025/26 season, member clubs will no longer carry gambling-related sponsors on the front of their shirts. However, clubs can still carry gambling-related advertising in stadiums, and also carry such advertising on any other part of the shirt that is not the front. The English Football League (EFL) have no such agreement in place at the time of writing.

Other than this voluntary agreement on the part of the EPL, the white paper suggests no other plans are in place to alter this element of the relationship between gambling businesses and football clubs. The white paper (UK Government 2023, CP835: 106) states:

> ‘Evidence we have received indicates that there could be serious financial impacts, particularly for sports and leagues outside the Premier League, including at grassroots level, if gambling sponsorship were removed without an alternative source of funding in place’.

Gambling sponsorship is worth around £45 million per year across the EFL’s three leagues (UK Government 2023, CP835: 104). The government’s principal concern appears to be that this would be difficult to replace if gambling-related sponsorship were to be banned. This is despite the fact that, as the white paper (UK Government 2023, CP835: 104) also acknowledges:

> ‘The evidence we have seen on sport sponsorship indicates that it does have a level of impact on gambling behaviour, although this may not be as marked as for other forms of marketing’.

In essence, the UK government has little intention to change the current situation. Thomas et al (2023: 1) argue that:

> ‘Sporting organisations, which can do so much to promote health, have become a vehicle for marketing, normalising gambling for children and young people’.

The white paper acknowledges that there are around 300,000 problem gamblers in the UK and a further 1.8 million who gamble “at elevated levels of risk”. Despite this, the money that sport receives from the gambling industry appears to outweigh any perceived need for regulation of shirt sponsorship.

Curiously, the position taken by the UK government and governing bodies in football is similar to that laid out in a heavily parodic advertising campaign developed by marketing and creative agencies VCCP and Octagon, and carried out in conjunction with the bookmakers Paddy Power. The “Save Our Shirt” campaign directly foreshadowed the position taken by the UK government, despite the campaign itself being laden with a knowing irony that lampoons the debate around the advertising and marketing of gambling in the UK.

The campaign involved the gambling business sponsoring five professional football clubs in the United Kingdom. The campaign was intended to be provocative and it challenged governing bodies, government stakeholders, and academics by targeting the contemporary debate about the role of gambling sponsorship in sport. In order for the campaign to operate effectively, the design had to refer directly to a series of signs and signifiers that would be recognisable to football fans and sport media. The campaign worked by highlighting inconsistencies at the heart of the British government’s policy on gambling. It also highlights similar inconsistencies within the policies pursued by football’s governing bodies, lampooning the issues in governance that these can cause. In addition, the campaign references positions taken by health professionals and academics, particularly those from the health science community.

It is notable that this intervention on the ongoing topic of gambling sponsorship came not from government or from governing bodies in British football but from a gambling business. Discussing the campaign, Octagon’s Jake Seymour-Hyde said ‘what there is now is a scale in which betting brands specifically associated with shirts has gone too far. Paddy Power can take a stand on how betting brands are using soccer’ (Dixon, 2019). The spectacle of a gambling company acting as the moral compass of a highly commercialised sport is arguably beyond parody, but the campaign does reference the wider debate about the relationship between gambling and football.

In particular, the campaign highlights the lack of regulation in the market for sponsorship by gambling companies. At the time of writing, Paddy Power are part of one of the largest gambling companies in the United Kingdom, Flutter Entertainment. Figures released by the Gambling Commission show that Paddy Power were, at the time of the "unsponsoring football" campaign, part of the group with the largest share of the online betting market in the UK. While smaller rivals from the UK and overseas have utilised shirt sponsorship as part of their marketing and advertising strategy for many years, 2019 marked the first time that Paddy Power had entered the shirt sponsorship market as far as football is concerned. Notably, Paddy Power entered the market to suggest – albeit parodically and with a heavy dose of knowing irony - that it should not exist.

The campaign also knowingly references football fan culture, particularly elements opposed to commercialisation and commodification of the sport. As I will examine below, unsponsored shirts are sometimes worn by fans in reference to an earlier, less commercial era. As Giulianotti and Robertson (2012: 229) discuss, social movements amongst football fans often coalesce against 'perceived threats to traditional "fan culture"' from incompetent and/or exploitative club owners (Webber 2017; May 2019), excessive regulation of fan activities (Doidge 2015; Choluj et al 2020), and most importantly for the analysis here, the role of corporate sponsors in commodifying fandom.

As per the work of Stride et al (2015) and discussions of the Against Modern Football (AMF) campaign by Hill et al (2018), some fans do indeed object to wearing shirts with the names and logos of sponsors on them. However, they do so because they object to the growing commercialisation of football (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004; Stride et al 2015). It is not so much the logo that fans object to, but the commercial sponsorship itself. The campaign references this resistance but as I will discuss, the actual link between football and gambling remained unchanged as a consequence of the "unsponsoring". The campaign also subverts

contemporary norms around shirt sponsorship while also maintaining the commercial link between the gambling industry and professional football. It is a novel but effective method of extending the existing "gamblification" of football. This process will be examined below but firstly, the nature of the campaign itself will be outlined.

Unsponsoring Football: "Save Our Shirt"

The "unsponsoring football" campaign involved Paddy Power partnering with five professional football clubs in the United Kingdom; Huddersfield Town, Southend United, Newport County, Macclesfield Town, and Motherwell (this latter club plays in the Scottish Premier League). None of these clubs play in the EPL but Huddersfield Town were relegated from the EPL into the EFL Championship for the 2019/20 season. Paddy Power (which is part of the Flutter Entertainment group, formerly known as Paddy Power Betfair plc) paid for the right to sponsor the matchday shirts of the clubs involved, and also for the right for the company's name to appear on replica shirts sold by the clubs. However, Paddy Power paid for this right but did not take it. The clubs involved played in shirts which did not feature Paddy Power's name or logo and sold replicas which do not carry the sponsor's name or logo either.

The removal of this advertising option could have less effect on the company than it would have on other rival companies with a portfolio of shirt sponsorships, as these businesses have based their marketing strategies around shirt sponsorship to a far greater extent and have a far smaller market share (Gambling Commission 2018). In addition to this, the campaign allowed Paddy Power to criticise its rivals, who have utilised football shirts as "bastardised advertising hoardings", to use Paddy Power's own description. In this case, Paddy Power chose to present a dichotomy between what fans want and what sponsors want.

Paddy Power's brand marketing director Michelle Spillane said of Save Our Shirt:

> ‘As a brand, we always try to be on the side of the fans – we know they love to wear their club colours with pride, but they don’t love being a walking advertising hoarding. Which is what ‘Save our Shirt’ is all about. At Paddy Power, we know our place as a sponsor – and it’s not on your shirt’ (Campaign, July 19th 2019).

The headline message on the website set up to support this campaign (2019) said ‘Save Our Shirt is actually just a common sense call for sponsors to stop bastardising football shirts and to return them to the fans. That’s it’.

Discussing the campaign, Paddy Power’s Head of PR Lee Price said:

> Every bookmaker, apart from Paddy Power it seemed, sponsors a football team and they’ll just lazily put their brand on there. Our tagline is ‘Enough of the Nonsense’ and we’re calling bullshit on football sponsorship generally, but the rest of the industry too. It wouldn’t be Paddy Power just to stick our logo on there (Marketing Week, 19 July 2019)

The “unsponsored” shirt allows Paddy Power to stand out from its rivals. Such is the pervasive nature of advertising, a marketing campaign that superficially subverts the normal process – buy the right to sponsor a club’s shirt, and place a logo on it – stands out. The sponsoring process itself is entirely commercialised. Despite this, Paddy Power discussed their desire to be seen as a ‘football brand’.

As the sponsored shirts themselves did not carry the logo of Paddy Power, the success of “Save Our Shirt” relied on public knowledge of Paddy Power’s activities. The ways that the firm ensured that their campaign led to a high public profile are instructive and show a nuanced understanding of context. Although advertising is rampant within football as discussed above, the rules that govern the form that advertising on football shirts can take are almost comically strict, bearing in mind how much advertising there is within the sport as a

whole. The English Football Association's regulation C.2(i) states that advertising should consist of one single area on the front of the shirt, not exceeding 250 square centimetres (BBC Sport, 5 September 2019). Knowing this to be the case, Paddy Power and Huddersfield Town arranged for the club to wear a shirt which featured a sash far wider than the regulations permit, containing the name of the sponsor. They did so knowing that a fine would ensue, and that the shirt would garner wide negative publicity. This certainly happened – the day after the shirt was worn, the *Daily Mail* (18 July 2019) produced an article which proclaimed that 'once-proud Huddersfield Town' had 'sold their soul' in what was termed a 'Paddy Power shirt farce'.

The shirt that contained the oversized logo was a spoof. Paddy Power unveiled the "Save our Shirt" campaign a few days after the match in which Huddersfield Town wore the oversized logo. The spoof shirt was designed to draw attention to Paddy Power and it certainly did so. Paddy Power's spokesman confirmed in an interview shortly after the campaign launched that they had fully expected there to be a big reaction to what they call the 'crap kit', which would allow them a wider audience for the Save our Shirt campaign (*Huddersfield Examiner*, 21 July 2019).

The company has long used publicity-related gimmicks to promote its services and "Save Our Shirt" has context in Paddy Power's other marketing activities. After scoring a goal at the 2012 European Football Championships, the Denmark international Nicklas Bendtner celebrated by pulling down the waistband of his shorts to reveal a pair of Paddy Power branded underpants (*Daily Telegraph*, 18 June 2012). The bookmaker sponsored the Tonga rugby union team at the 2007 Rugby World Cup, and persuaded the team to dye their hair green – this is the colour of Paddy Power's logo (*The Guardian*, 28 September 2007). It also persuaded one Tongan player to change his name by deed poll to Paddy Power (*The Guardian*, 28 September 2007).

The “gamblification” of football?

The involvement of gambling companies in sport is significant and Djohari et al (2019) discuss the “normalisation” of links between sport and gambling. Sharman (2022) and McGee (2020) note that this process is prevalent in professional football and argue this represents the “gamblification” of the sport. This term first appeared in the work of McMullan and Miller (2008) and has been used in a variety of ways since. Macey and Hamari (2022:10) produced a consolidated definition of “gamblification” which is of value for its utility and brevity: ‘the (increased) presence of gambling (or gambling-related content) in non-gambling contexts in order to realise desired outcomes’. Sport is a non-gambling context but the presence of gambling is pervasive.

Further to this working definition of “gamblification”, Macey and Hamari (2022:10) argue that it ‘incorporates two main aspects: affective (employing cultural values/signifiers of gambling); and effective (employing gambling games and activities)’. My interest here is in the former. The football shirt itself often contains signifiers of gambling, usually in the form of sponsor’s logos. Relevant to this, Hing, Rockloff and Browne (2023) argue that gamblification involves the normalisation of gambling as an accepted, everyday feature of sports culture. Part of my argument below is that even when sponsor’s logos do not feature on shirts, fans know that they “should” be there and are aware of commercial links.

As McGee and Bunn (2023) suggest, examining gambling sociologically can be a “confounding” task because much research in the field derives from behavioural science and, as such, pathologises gambling using medical models that split behaviours into “responsible” and “problem” gambling. The study of gambling addiction is prevalent and McGee and Bunn (2023: 3) identify a tendency for this line of research to focus on individual factors such as ‘human deficiency, deviance and irresponsibility’. As Bond et al (2024) argue, while it is

certainly important for work within health sciences to consider gambling using medical models so that interventions can be designed and implemented, this approach is not always appropriate for analyses of gambling within the social sciences.

This is the case because gambling is a complex social phenomenon which is socially constructed and socially determined (Wardle 2021; McGee and Bunn 2024; Bond et al 2024). It is a form of leisure that Bond et al (2024: 27) suggest is "embedded" in social networks and wider social structures, and gambling behaviour is both 'constrained and facilitated' by the context (s) of individual lives. Quoting a conversation with another gambling researcher, Gerda Reith, Wardle (2021) suggests that gambling is a lens through which any social process can be examined, across various historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts. Given this, the range of work that focuses on gambling is relatively wide and continues to grow (for some of the latest work in the area, McGee and Bunn's 2024 edited collection *Gambling and Sports in a Global Age* gives a useful outline of the varied directions that gambling researchers are taking).

Even where research focuses on the harms that can be caused by gambling, the importance of leisure is also a focus. Wardle's (2021) work on the relationship between gambling and gaming is a good example of this, in that it focuses on the importance of game-playing to human experience but also examines gambling harms related to leisure. Bunn et al (2019), Jones et al (2020) and Banks and Waters (2023) also examine harms experienced by those who suffer from addiction to gambling and there is a link between sociological work on gambling harms and work produced within the field of public health; Cassidy and Ovenden (2017) and Djohari et al (2019) compare the involvement of the gambling industry in sport to other "risky" forms of sponsorship such as that by the tobacco industry or the alcohol industry. While these are either regulated or banned outright, the relationship between the gambling industry and professional sport in the UK is firmly embedded (Jones et al 2020).

Research into gambling awareness has discovered that levels of knowledge of gambling companies among young people are high (Cassidy and Ovenden 2017; Djohari et al 2019).

In examining the impacts of gambling, Wardle et al (2019) suggest that what is needed is:

> systematic reframing of the issue that recognises the major burden of harms that gambling places on not only individuals but also communities and society and that acknowledges the role of commercial, policy, and regulatory forces in shaping the environment in which these harms occur.

Given the focus on societal issues and environment, this approach is very much relevant to studies that take a sociological angle on gambling.

In addition to this important intervention, significant earlier work by Reith and Dobbie (2013) discusses the concept of the "gambling career"; the authors argue that gamblers display identifiable patterns of behaviour, and suggest that rather than research focussing on gambling as a linear, progressive condition (usually examined as a medical and/or psychological problem, as McGee and Bunn (2023) and Bond et al (2024) discuss), gambling should instead be understood in terms of behavioural patterns that are impacted by social and environmental context (s). In essence, the position outlined is that gambling can present a societal problem which businesses, policymakers and regulatory bodies can and do impact. Hing et al (2023) discuss a "symbiotic ecosystem" that supports gambling in sports, which includes sport organisations, gambling businesses, media companies, sport audiences and governments. It is important to examine the role that these stakeholders play and examine how they interact with each other. I do this below with relation to a specific area where "gamblification" can be identified; the sponsorship of football shirts by gambling businesses.

Why sponsor a football shirt?

Football has experienced hyper-commercialisation over the past two decades and become one of the richest commercial markets of the contemporary era (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004, 2012; Millward 2011, 2012, 2013; Numerato and Giulianotti 2018; Webber 2017, 2021). This process has been examined many times by many scholars in the area, to the extent that it is now well established in the literature and the terrain does not need to be explored again here. The national context for this article is primarily the United Kingdom (UK), in part because the English Premier League (EPL) is the most lucrative football league in the world (Millward 2011, 2012, 2013; Webber 2017, 2021). As it is possible to be promoted into this league from the competition below this, the English Football League (EFL) Championship, winning this competition is also lucrative. Deloitte (2020) reported collective revenues of £785 million in this competition, with a possible £160 million in revenue to be gained in a single season upon promotion to the EPL.

Commercialisation in professional football is driven to a large extent by globalisation (Giulianotti and Robertson 2004, 2012; Millward 2011, 2012, 2013; May 2019; Webber 2021). Investment from media partners such as Sky and BT Sport, billionaire club owners from across the globe, and commercial partners from a range of industries, including automotive (Chevrolet and Manchester United), banking (Liverpool and Standard Chartered), and air travel (Arsenal and Emirates, Manchester City and Etihad Airways) have all helped make football a lucrative market. Sportswear manufacturers also pay for the right to produce football shirts and other clothing worn by football clubs – Nike, Adidas, and Puma all have partnerships with clubs in the English Premier League (EPL). The value of replica shirt sales in a single EPL season can be as much as £265 million (Sporting Intelligence 2016).

As Benzecry (2008) explores, the football shirt itself is an item with a wide range of meanings. Attempting to define the meaning of any object is, as Benzecry (2008) suggests, somewhat tricky but nevertheless one that has been attempted by a range of social scientists,

influenced by foundational studies in the field – among these we might find the work of Veblen, Bourdieu, Durkheim, and Baudrillard alongside many others. Benzecry (2008: 49) suggests that 'distinction between commodification and authenticity' forms the core of many analyses. This is certainly true with relation to the work of Baudrillard (1981/1994 and 1981/2019), who discusses a concept which he calls "symbolic exchange". For Baudrillard (1981/1994 and 1981/2019), the exchange of goods and services is central to the functioning of society, and the value of these goods and services is bound by the wider terms of social relations between people.

The football shirt itself is a highly visible sign within what is a lucrative commercial market (Benzecry 2008; Stride et al 2015; Stride, Catley and Headland 2020). For fans, the football shirt can be a way of demonstrating an important level of identity. However, for sponsors, the football shirt is a commercial opportunity. Benzecry (2008) describes this as the difference between "commodity" and "totem"; the latter term derives from the work of Durkheim (1965) and relates to a community with defined boundaries, in this case a community of fans. The first shirt sponsorship dates back to the 1970s, and it is now commonplace for clubs to carry the logos of two or more companies, in addition to the logo of the manufacturer of the shirt (Stride et al 2015). The value of shirt sponsorship in the EPL was £349.1 million for the 2019/20 season (*The Guardian*, 17 July 2019). It is common for fans to purchase replica shirts which contain the full range of possible advertising; these are the main shirt sponsor, shirt manufacturer, sleeve sponsor, sponsor on the back of the shirt, league sponsor, and a sponsor for the number that the player wears on the back of the shirt.

The key aim of sponsoring a football club's shirt appears to be to get that brand on television, via exposure in televised football matches (Sharman 2022). In the UK, there currently there is no prohibition on gambling advertisements during television broadcasts of live sport – this includes advertising through shirt sponsorship. Bunn et al (2019) note a significant increase

in gambling-related sponsorship post-2005, arguing that this is a consequence of the 2005 Gambling Act and an associated relaxation of regulations with regard to advertising of gambling services. Gambling policy has moved away from a model built around state intervention and instead, 'ideologies of freedom of choice and consumer sovereignty now underpin gambling legislation' (Banks and Waters 2023: 665). Ferguson (2010) suggests that neoliberal policy involves the deployment of mechanisms developed in the private sector within the functions of the state. Essentially, the pursuit of profit fundamentally changes state policy (Parnell et al 2021). There is an established market for gambling, and government policy is that this market should be minimally regulated so that profits can be maximised. This – alongside market forces related to the global popularity of English football – meant that the "Save Our Shirt" campaign was launched into an environment where gambling sponsorship was extensive.

During the season under examination for this article (2019/20), ten of the 20 clubs in the English Premier League (EPL) carried the logo of a gambling company on the front of their shirts, while two of these also carried the logo of another gambling company on the sleeve (*The Guardian* 19th July 2019; Sharman 2022). Most EPL clubs also have "official gambling partners", which are advertised in stadia, on websites, and on social media (Sharman 2022). Of the £349.1 million that EPL clubs earned from shirt sponsorship deals in the 2019/20 season, £69 million emanated from sponsorship by firms within the gambling industry (The Guardian 19th July 2019). At the professional level below the EPL, 17 of the 24 clubs in the Football League Championship were sponsored by gambling companies in the 2019/20 season (The Guardian 19th July 2019).

Four clubs were sponsored by 32 Red, which is based in Gibraltar. Other sponsors were based in Malta, East Africa, Asia, and the Republic of Ireland. The involvement of overseas gambling companies with EPL and EFL Championship clubs is a clear example of

globalisation in action. The only UK-based gambling business other than Paddy Power (which splits operations between the UK and Ireland as part of Flutter Entertainment) to sponsor a club was Bet 365. This particular business is part-owned by Peter Coates, who is also chairman of Stoke City. In Leagues One and Two, only one gambling-related business sponsored a club, other than Paddy Power. These leagues are televised far less frequently than the Championship, and therefore there is less obvious value in sponsoring the shirt of a club at that level. However, the entire competition was sponsored by SkyBet and each professional team in England carried some form of gambling-related advertising on their sleeve. In Scotland, the only two clubs to carry gambling-related sponsorship on the front of their shirts were Celtic (Dafabet, based in the Philippines) and Rangers (32 Red, Gibraltar). The entire competition was sponsored by Ladbrokes, however, so as in England, each team in Scotland carried some form of gambling-related advertising on their sleeve.

Understanding markets through Baudrillard: the symbolic order and the football shirt

Baudrillard (1981/1994 and 1981/2019) discusses society in terms of a “symbolic order”, within which ‘reciprocity between subjects (people) is the social glue that holds society together’ (Ostergaard and Fitchett 2012: 239). The work undertaken here demonstrates the importance of understanding the symbolic order that underpins any market through analysis of a particularly relevant context – in this case, the market is sport-related advertising. Baudrillard utilises a somewhat similar approach – *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981/1994) addresses contexts as varied as science fiction, hypermarkets, and art galleries, while *For A Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981/2019) discusses art auctions, fashion, and household items.

In work inspired by semioticians (such as Saussure), Baudrillard (1981/1994) argues that the world is understood through a system of signs and signifiers. Baudrillard also argues that the

way that the sign is understood has changed as social relations have also changed. He is somewhat vague on the exact point in history where the sign changes value, but nevertheless his argument centres around the idea that changes have taken place. According to Baudrillard, the symbolic order through which society is organised has progressed through three stages; the order of imitation, the order of production, and the order of simulation. Broadly, the first order relates to the pre-modern era, the second to modernity, and the third to the postmodern era. In the order of imitation, the sign 'simulates reciprocity' and has an absolute reference to reality with relation to use value (Ostergaard and Fitchett 2012: 241). In the order of production, the value of signs become relative to their market value, as an associated increase in the importance of an economic order takes place. The focus of production in this stage is on exchange value, relating to economic equivalence. In the final order, the order of simulation, 'signs become increasingly estranged from their original referent to the point where the referent (or 'reality') disappears altogether' (Ostergaard and Fitchett, 2012: 243).

In its early form, the shirt had value principally to those who wore it to play football. It was produced and sold for use value. This relates to the order of imitation. Within the second order, that of production, replica shirts were produced and sold to fans. The shirt demonstrated support. At the third order, that of simulation, replica football shirts are still produced for sale. However, they also have other meanings and uses. For sponsors, they are a vehicle for furthering the visibility of their business. Fans are obliged to carry a proliferation of signs, some of which they may have little personal interest in. The increasing commercialisation of football is clear through the progression of the shirt itself, which has become a vehicle for marketing and advertising campaigns, rather than just being a piece of sporting equipment.

The progression of the football shirt as a commercialised item might be described as follows, utilising Baudrillard's (1981/1994 and 1981/2019) symbolic order:

1. The original football shirt. The authentic article whose only usage was to be worn as an item of athletic clothing by footballers.

2. The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but also as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club.

3. The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club, but which also is a method of carrying advertising.

4. The football shirt which is not an athletic garment at all but which nevertheless has commercial value.

I will examine two such simulacra below. The value of signs is not determined by their use or exchange value, but by reference to each other and a wider, codified system termed "sign value". The context in which a sign appears is central to the value it has within the order of simulation, and as per Ostergaard and Fitchett (2012) it is not arbitrary. A clear understanding of any market involves understanding the signs that are most important within it.

The "crap kit", the symbolic order, and simulacra

In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard (1981/1994) maps the progression of the relationships between signs and what they signify, particularly with regard to the development of ideologies and consumption. Baudrillard (1981/1994: 6) lays out a four stage progression through which signs become increasingly abstracted from reality, and instead construct reality in their own right. This progression argues that with regard to any given sign:

it is the reflection of a profound reality;

it masks and denatures a profound reality;

it masks the absence of a profound reality;

it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own pure simulacrum.

Baudrillard (1981/1994 and 1981/2019) argues that the progressive reproduction of any sign involves a process of simulation whereby there is an increasing detachment from the initial stage, where a sign is reflective of reality. In the second and third stages of reproduction and transmutation, the sign becomes progressively decoupled from what it initially signified. In the fourth stage, the simulation 'assumes a life of its own where it is no longer real or imaginary, but exchangeable with itself and thence equal to the real in its own right' (Hietanen et al 2020: 31). The simulacrum at stage four of the process has progressed to a level whereby 'it can produce ideology by taking part in the system of signification' (Hietanen et al 2020: 31). This leads to a stage within the production of ideology which Baudrillard (1981/1994) terms the "hyperreal", within which simulations of reality produce what Hietanen et al (2020: 31) describe as 'a game of appearances'. Baudrillard (1981/1994) does not argue that there is "no reality", or a culture primarily made up of fakes. Rather, the "hyperreal" defines the contemporary era, within which simulations of reality have the same exchange value as the items they originally simulated.

With relation to Baudrillard's procession of simulacra, the "crap kit" discussed above is relevant to stage four. Neither the club nor the sponsor had any intention of the club actually wearing the shirt for more than one match, or of the shirt being offered for sale to fans. However, the shirt nevertheless had utility for the sponsor as it allowed them to create media interest, which in turn led to increased impact for the marketing campaign that followed. The simulacra therefore had little reference to stage one, and none even to stage two of the process. The procession is as follows:

1. The original football shirt. The authentic article whose only usage was to be worn as an item of athletic clothing by footballers.

2. The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but also as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club.

3. The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club, but which also is a method of carrying advertising.

4. The spoof football shirt, which is not primarily intended to be an athletic garment or to be sold, but to draw attention to a sponsor.

Baudrillard's ideas are also relevant to the "unsponsored" kit. Discussing the order of simulacra, Ostergaard and Fitchett (2012: 245) note a cornerstone of Baudrillard's work:

> Products are not given an arbitrary sign value, as might be expected when the sign is detached. Instead, sign value often refers to meanings from the past, even if the cultural context of such a reference has disappeared.

The "unsponsored" kit superficially brings an earlier, less commercial era of football to mind. However, in this case the "sign" – the logo of a football shirt sponsor – may not have been present on the shirt itself but it would have been present in the mind of those familiar with Paddy Power and the "unsponsoring football" campaign. The second, "unsponsored" shirt produced within the campaign was arguably intended to refer to an era that has disappeared. Sponsorship is all-pervasive in modern football and it is incredibly rare for a team to lack a shirt sponsor.

This relates to wider debates about the nature of fandom and particularly commercialisation of fan culture. The shirt arguably parodies debates amongst football fans about the role of the

replica shirt as a vehicle for commercialisation. There is a market for replica “retro” shirts which do not feature any advertising at all, or on which the advertising is at least more subtle or the sponsor itself a company which is either local or redolent of a particular period in history, one prior to the commercial explosion of the sport (Stride et al 2015). Some supporters wear retro replica shirts to indicate the authenticity of their fandom, however nebulous a concept this might be in terms of the possibility of actually measuring it (Kendall and Osbaldiston, 2010; Dixon, 2013; Stride et al, 2015). As Giulianotti and Robertson (2004: 561) argue, ‘the construction of nostalgic discourses within football largely reflects particular glocal responses to social change’. Broadly speaking, the sponsor-free or retro shirt represents one public method of rejecting the contemporary mode of football fandom in favour of a sign borrowed from an earlier, less commercial era.

The retro replica relates to another key concept within Baudrillard’s work; the procession of simulacra. With relation to the case study at hand, the retro replica is not designed to be worn by footballers. It does not relate to the purpose of the “original”, although it simulates the same appearance. To adapt Baudrillard’s concept, the procession of the retro replica can be laid out as follows:

1. *The original football shirt. The authentic article whose only usage was to be worn as an item of athletic clothing by footballers.*
2. *The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but also as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club.*
3. *The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club, but which also is a method of carrying advertising.*

4. *The retro replica, which is not primarily intended to be an athletic garment but instead to have aesthetic and ideological appeal. Its lack of advertising or its reference to advertising from an earlier era is part of that appeal.*

Discussing the concept of authenticity with relation to a slightly earlier development in Baudrillard's thinking, the order of simulacra, Ostergaard and Fitchett (2012: 245) note a cornerstone of Baudrillard's work:

> Products are not given an arbitrary sign value, as might be expected when the sign is detached. Instead, sign value often refers to meanings from the past, even if the cultural context of such a reference has disappeared.

One of the values of the retro shirt as a sign of "authentic" fandom is that it is intended to refer to a past mode of fandom, one less marked by commercialisation. In this case the retro shirt is a sign representative of opposition to elements of the globalised, heavily commercial world of professional football. The shirt is also a referent which makes the argument on behalf of the wearer. It produces ideology as per Baudrillard's ideas and also as per Hietanen et al (2019). Those who understand the context within which the shirt is worn, and have an understanding of the codes of fandom, also understand that for some fans it represents a particular viewpoint opposed to what Stride et al (2015) and Hill et al (2018) discuss as "modern football". That the shirt is not an authentic, original item does not preclude the point from being made. Consumers are aware that they are not buying original items. The shirts nevertheless have aesthetic appeal and additional, contextual appeal. The appearance of authenticity can be as important, or indeed even more important, than actually having an "authentic" product to sell.

The "unsponsored" shirt produced by Paddy Power is superficially similar to the retro replicas worn by some fans. However, it represents another example of a simulacrum,

intended to refer directly to debates about authenticity in football fandom. The progression of the football shirt in question can be adapted from Baudrillard's work:

1. *The original football shirt. The authentic article whose only usage was to be worn as an item of athletic clothing by footballers.*
2. *The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but also as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club.*
3. *The replica football shirt, designed not just as an athletic garment but as a piece of leisurewear which signals support for a football club, but which also is a method of carrying advertising.*
4. *The "unsponsored" football shirt where the company involved have actually paid not to have their logo on the shirt.*

The shirt produced at step four echoes the shirt at step one to some extent. It does not carry the logo of a sponsor and has the appearance of being in some sense "authentic" and/or uncommercial, much like the retro replica. However, the shirt only carries no logo at the behest of a sponsor and was produced as part of a heavily promoted commercial campaign. To utilise the semiotics that influenced Baudrillard, the sign in this case is the logo of a sponsor on a football shirt. That in turn signifies the gamblification of the sport. The absence of the logo only signifies a reduction in gamblification if indeed that process has taken place. The absence of Paddy Power's logo does not indicate any reduction in the relationship between gambling business and football. It is just a blank space in lieu of a logo.

Summary

The "Unsponsoring Football" campaign may have been a heavily parodic method of advertising a gambling company but it also pre-empted the position taken by the UK

government. Essentially, the 2023 White Paper "High Stakes: Gambling Reform for the Digital Age" (UK Government 2023, CP835) promises to remove just one element of gambling advertising while keeping the rest of the relationship between the gambling industry and sport – in this case professional football – firmly in place. "Unsponsoring Football" did exactly the same thing, but while Paddy Power are a bookmaker with a principal interest in making money, the UK government should – according to many scholars (including, but not limited to Banks and Waters 2023; Sharman 2022; Bunn et al 2019; Djohari et al 2019; Wardle et al 2019) – be protecting vulnerable people from gambling harms.

The production of a simulacra – in this case a "crap kit" – allowed the campaign to gain traction. I am not particularly convinced that VCP and Octagon sat down and said "we will create a simulacra" but nevertheless, that is what they did produce. To do this, VCP, Octagon and Paddy Power needed an excellent understanding of the context of their campaign, and in particular the symbolic order that football shirts are produced within. The campaign references football fan culture, particularly opposition to commercialisation and commodification. The campaign references this resistance, and also opposition to "gamblification", while also arguably parodying both. It also subverts contemporary norms around shirt sponsorship by removing the logo of Paddy Power. The campaign represents a change in the way that the football shirt is used as a vehicle for the signs related to advertising. Fans would be well aware that the blank space on the shirts did not symbolise the end of advertising – they would only need to look at the advertising hoardings in football stadiums to know this. Fans are also not foolish – not many would have seriously thought that Paddy Power were undertaking an altruistic gesture or voluntarily withdrawing their advertising permanently. However, the removal of the sponsor's logo was framed as a gesture "for the fans" and it did – superficially at least – reference what some fans want. It also

referenced arguments that some scholars have made about regulating gambling sponsorship (for example Cassidy and Ovenden 2017 and Djohari et al (2019).

Ultimately “unsponsoring football” was a novel but effective method of extending the existing gamblification of football. It did not actually alter the relationship between professional sport and gambling businesses. Fans could buy shirts which do not have Paddy Power’s logo on them but the levels of gamblification involved in the sponsoring process remained exactly the same. “Unsponsoring Football” removed the logo of Paddy Power but not the actual involvement of the gambling business. Another brand owned by Flutter Entertainment was advertised on the shirt sleeve of four of the sponsored clubs, in any case. The campaign also required VCP, Octagon and Paddy Power to “second guess” what policy makers were likely to suggest. They did this extremely successfully. If policymakers are serious about changing the relationship between sport and gambling, they will need to make far more substantial changes than removing logos from shirts.

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