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Does corruption in sport corrode social capital? An experimental study in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT
Research question: UK government policy stresses the positive role that sport has on social outcomes and in the formation of social capital. However, while recognising the presence of corruption in sport, policy documentation barely considers the impact that corruption might have on social capital. This raises the following question, if sport can help build social capital, then does corruption in sport corrode it?
Research methods: To answer this question, we drew on an experimental study design and the perceptions of 678 UK residents.
Results and findings: The results indicate that being confronted with a sport corruption case corrodes people’s trust in sport organisations, as well as their trust in their neighbourhood, though not other elements of social capital, such as personal relationships and civic engagement. However, the more people engage with sport, the less their trust is affected.
Implications: The corrosion of trust indicates that corruption in sport can damage social capital. However, given that this erosion is ameliorated through a greater engagement with sport, sports organisations should engage in early robust challenges to any lack of integrity to prevent it from becoming embedded.

1. Introduction
Research suggests that sport can have a key role in developing and sustaining a shared culture and identity within a community, bringing people of different backgrounds and social strata together, and cultivating social capital among them (Kumar et al., 2018; Skinner et al., 2008). Ample studies exist that support the notion of sport as a tool for social and community development. As such, engagement with sport through participation, volunteering, and spectatorship is believed to assist in social inclusion and cohesion (Burnett, 2006; Darcy et al., 2014; Perks, 2007). Supported by this research, the UK Government sports policy argues that sport is an area in need of investment and promotion, in order to assist in building social capital and deliver social outcomes (Her Majesty’s Government, 2015). Hence, it is argued that engagement with sport should be actively encouraged, as “the evidence for sport’s impact on building social capital … is well-established”, in the Government’s Sporting Future policy (Her Majesty’s Government, 2015,
p. 72). It is worth noting that the same policy neglects the rather darker side of sport which links it with negative social outcomes, such as aggression and exclusion (Coakley, 2015). At the same time, while the same policy recognises the presence of corruption in sport, it does not consider the possibility that erosion of social capital might be possible if adverse sporting experiences such as corruption occur.

Outside of sport, at a macro level, public policy research argues that corruption can harm the political stability, economic development, and administrative efficiency of governments, having long-term damaging effects on governance internationally (Ko & Samajdar, 2010; Kubbe, 2014) as well as on income and employment (Rose, 2018). Likewise, beyond its economic effects, corruption is also widely recognised for its harmful repercussions on society and morality, with noteworthy sociological effects also highlighted by research (Brass et al., 1998; Judge et al., 2011).

At the meso level, corruption can undermine organisational integrity and lead to business misconduct, though this can be mediated by the form of authority that leaders of organisations adopt (Aguilera & Vadera, 2008). Organisational corruption can shape the moral disengagement of the organisation’s actors, reinforcing deviant behaviour (Hystad, Mearns, & Eid, 2014). At the micro level, it follows that corruption can have a negative effect on individual intrinsic honesty, which is a key element of the smooth functioning of society (Banerjee, 2016; Gachter & Schulz, 2016). Corruption can also directly impact people’s happiness (Wu & Zhu, 2016) and their trust in governmental institutions (Morris & Klesner, 2010).

In line with this scholarly inquiry, corruption in sport has been attracting research interest because of its latent but persistent presence, with corruption potentially considered to be “normal” or inevitable due to the fast and uncontrollable development and commercialisation of the sport industry, as well as the lax structure and control mechanisms within it (Manoli et al., 2019; Manoli et al., 2020). Ranging from individuals’ transgressions, to organisation-wide scandals, corruption has been identified in numerous sports, including commercialised, professional and elite contexts, such as football (Yilmaz et al., 2019), baseball (Lin & Chen, 2015) and cycling (Schneider, 2006), as well as grassroots, non-commercialised and amateur sports, like chess (Solberg & Olderøien, 2018), netball (Kihl et al., 2020), and grassroots football, tennis, and badminton (Nowy & Breuer, 2017; Van Der Hoeven et al., 2020).

While the full extent of corruption in sport is yet to be determined (Gardiner et al., 2017; Kihl et al., 2020), the potential negative effects of corruption in sport on itself, and also on wider society might be significant (Kihl, 2018; Kihl et al., 2008; Kihl & Richardson, 2009). Indeed, even though it is suggested that corruption can harm sport and their commercial demand, leading potentially to the complete collapse of leagues if they are found to be corrupt (Hill, 2010), the nature and extent of the negative effects corruption can cause on sport and society are unexplored, in particular on the micro or individual level (Kihl, 2018). Taking this into consideration, and bearing in mind the wider UK public policy argument of sport as a means of delivering social outcomes, we pose the following question: “does exposure to corruption in sport corrode an individual’s social capital?” The present study aims to explore this question in the UK by adopting an experimental design investigating whether exposure to instances of corruption in sport influence subjects’ expression of social capital. The novel focus of the paper lies on the question of individuals’ social capital after their exposure to instances of corruption in sport, by also exploring a wide spectrum of subjects, including those who are not taking part in sport as volunteers or direct participants, which is the main context of much research. This, in turn, allows for the inclusion of
members of society who experience sport more passively, and who together with sport participants and volunteers are more representative of the wider population to which policy is aimed.

The article is structured as follows: first, the policy context that we draw upon is presented. The theoretical foundations of sport and social capital and corruption in sport are then examined. Following this, the methodology of our study and the data analysis conducted is discussed, alongside the findings of our research. Finally, the discussion and implications of our study are outlined, followed by a presentation of the study’s limitations and opportunities for future research.

2. Context and theoretical foundations

2.1. The UK policy context

As noted by Kumar, Downward, Hodgkinson, and Manoli (2019) sport acted as part of social welfare policy immediately after the Second World War, becoming encapsulated in the European “Sport for all” policy initiative in the 1970s. This approach to policy embraced direct government intervention in the provision of sport from developing facilities through to developing the relevant policy organisations to deliver sport. By the 1980s, however, a strong neoliberal economic desire from conservative governments led to cuts in public spending, the deregulation of public leisure services and the encouragement of private sector initiatives (Gratton & Taylor, 1991; Houlihan, 1997; Henry, 1993). Some changes to public investment in sport occurred in the 1990s, under the Department of National Heritage strategy “Raising the Game” from the John Major Government (Houlihan, 1997), but recent sports policy in the UK found its New Public Management expression with the arrival of Tony Blair’s New Labour Government in 1997. Its sport strategy document “Game Plan” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport/Strategy Unit (DCMS/SU), 2002 emphasised a twin-track strategy to deliver elite sport success as well as increase grass-roots participation, but in this market provision of sport was not emphasised unless there was a need to correct for market failures that delivered relevant outcomes for society (Green, 2009; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Houlihan, 2011). The current strategy, developed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat (David Cameron-Nick Clegg) coalition government, and yet to be fully re-examined by Boris Johnson and successor Government, reinforces the existing focus by emphasising the need for sports organisations to achieve personal, social and economic outcomes to receive public funding. However, other organisations are equally eligible to receive such funding. Consequently, the strategy argues that:

we will be much bolder in harnessing the potential of sport for social good. In delivering this Strategy we will change sport funding so it is no longer merely about how many people take part, but rather how sport can have a meaningful and measurable impact on improving people’s lives…(such as) …improving community cohesion. (Her Majesty’s Government, 2015, p.6)

Moreover, as well as seeking to deliver elite sports success the strategy also emphasises a need to

…stand up for the integrity of the sports we love. We should be proud of the role that British journalists have played in lifting the veil on corruption and poor governance at the heart of some of the biggest international sports. (Cabinet Office, 2015, p.7)

Despite these pronouncements, however, the links between corruption, engagement with sport and its social impacts are not addressed.

2.2. Sport and social capital

2.2.1. Concepts

Social capital can be viewed as a wide-encompassing term and concept, covering the
institutions, relations, behaviours, and values that guide the connections between individuals, while contributing to both financial and social development (Adam & Rončević, 2003; Adler & Kwon, 2002; Hooghe & Stolle, 2003). Social capital theory typically identifies its roots in the works of Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that social capital reflects durable networks of relationships that are developed by elites in society to the exclusion of others, while Coleman (1988, 1994) presents social capital as possibly accessible to all as a public good, through family and community relationships, as well as formal organisations. Likewise, drawing on Coleman (Scrivens & Smith, 2013), Putnam (1993; 2000) views social capital as applicable across society, for example through the development of trust, while suggesting that different organisations and social ties may affect social capital differently. As Putnam (1993, p. 11) argues: “social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit”. Putnam’s (1993) conceptualisation of social capital distinguishes between bridging and bonding capital, with the former associated with (horizontally) linking similar people, and the latter (vertically) linking different people and groups. Through this detailed examination, Putnam offers a framework for appreciating how trust between individuals, and reciprocal customs and norms contribute to connectivity through civic engagement. Putnam’s and by implication Coleman’s approach to social capital is used to inform the present research, as they shape the basis of current UK measurement, which is used to inform this study as well (Harper & Kelly, 2003; Scrivens & Smith, 2013). For example, the current measurement of social capital in the UK by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) makes a distinction between the individual and collective levels by which social capital exists, and the structures and resources that follow from them. Thus, at the individual level, the “structure” of personal relationships develops the resources of an individual’s social network. At the collective level, the structure of civic engagement develops the resource of trust and cooperative norms (ONS, 2017; Scrivens & Smith, 2013). Such individual and collective resources could be identified, for example, by the engagement of individuals with their relatives, and the trust expressed in others and organisations, respectively.

2.2.2. Formation

There are several ways engagement with sport can contribute to social capital. First, sport can take the form of social activity, and in fact, being a member of sport clubs or sport groups is considered to be one of the defining features of civic engagement and social capital identified by Putnam (2000). Second, sport can help develop sometimes extensive personal networks, incorporating a number of individuals. For example, networks of the parents of a small sport team, the fans of a sport club and volunteers involved in organising a sport event (Hoye & Nicholson, 2012; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Third, sport can be of great significance in terms of developing a shared identity among people and generating a bond among dissimilar individuals who are supporters of a sport team on a regional and national scale (Palmer & Thompson, 2007). Each of these dimensions has been examined in existing research, as we discuss below.

There is a large literature examining participation in sport and the development of social capital through engagement in sports clubs (Becker & Häring, 2012; Pawlowski et al., 2018; Ulseth, 2004). For example, some empirical studies have examined whether sports participation helps to establish new or strengthen existing relationships. Becker and Häring (2012) found that participation in sport is associated with having more and stronger personal relationships – measured by the number of friends, frequency of contact with friends,
and the number of social contexts in which individuals take part. “Perceived support by friends in difficult times” was a strong indicator of stronger relationships/friendships of children participating in sports groups in another study (Pawlowski et al., 2018).

The relationship between sport participation and social support networks has also been examined. Research has shown that sport participation positively impacts the willingness to help friends, neighbours, or relatives (Schüttoff et al., 2018). Positive associations between sport participation and civic engagement can be also found in the existing literature (e.g. Delaney & Keaney, 2005). The study by Schüttoff et al. (2018) revealed additionally that sports participation during adolescence was related to civic involvement in a citizens’ group, political party, or local government depending on the type of sport and organisation.

In contrast, research examining the relationship between sport participation, trust and cooperative norms has resulted in some ambiguous findings. For example, a positive association has been shown between being a member of a voluntary sports organisation and generalised trust, whereas the association was weaker compared to voluntary organisations in general (Seippel, 2006). However, individuals involved in physical activity were more likely to exhibit trust and prosocial behaviour (Di Bartolomeo & Papa, 2017).

Likewise, there has been a widespread examination of the role of volunteering in sport and the level of social capital that is developed in these communities (Hoye & Nicholson, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Nicholson & Hoye, 2008). Indeed, it has long been suggested that a drop in levels of sport participation and volunteerism could be the sign of declining social capital (Putnam, 1993).

Finally, there has been long-standing research investigating fans’ spectatorship and social capital in sport (Palmer & Thompson, 2007; Wann et al., 2015). What is, perhaps, less well-researched is the potential connection between a wider experience of sport and the development of social capital and yet this is potentially an important channel of development. Thus, Phua (2012) identifies the possibility of the formation of social capital through the social networking of fans, and Collins and Heere (2018) show how shared experiences from groups of fans that are geographically remote from their team generate social capital. It is this wider experience of and engagement with sport that is investigated in this paper, which studies a wide spectrum of subjects, including those who are not actively engaged in sport participation or consumption, in order to explore a more representative sample of the wider population to which policy is aimed.

2.3. Perceptions of corruption in sport

While corruption is widely acknowledged in the public domain, including the policy documents discussed above, it lacks a universally accepted definition (Rose, 2018). Despite this lack of conceptual consensus, corruption is most often defined as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain” (Transparency International, 2022). Due to the term’s “umbrella” nature, corruption in relation to sport has been used to refer to a number of often dissimilar actions capturing both playing and non-playing related actions, such as match-fixing, doping, athlete transgressions, tax evasion, and bribery in the context of sport alone (Andreff, 2018; Gardiner, 2018; Gorse & Chadwick, 2010; Sassenberg et al., 2018; Sato et al., 2015).

Among the various antecedents and results of corruption that have been explored, trust appears to have gained particular attention, since it is argued that it can be both the cause and the consequence of corruption, especially in the context of politics (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Corruption is indeed viewed as a breach of trust (when one abuses their “entrusted power for their personal gain” as
the definition argues – Transparency International, 2022) and as such the mutual and circular relationship between the two can be highlighted (Gardiner, 2018). In simple terms, as Uslaner (2004) argues, the lack of trust towards institutions “permits” for corruption to exist, while corruption itself feeds into a lack of trust towards institutions. However, when one is to examine corruption and social capital on a wider scale, the relationship between the two is not always clear, with ambiguous findings shown in existing studies (e.g. Banerjee (2016) argues that corruption decays social capital while Bjørnskov (2003) does not confirm causality). To the best of our knowledge, such an exploration of the relationship between corruption and social capital in the context of sport has not been attempted to this day prior to our study.

At the same time, as discussed in the introduction, corruption is a social phenomenon, subjectively experienced, shaped and influenced by each individual, within the socio-economic environment in which they operate (Masters & Graycar, 2015). As Heidenheimer (2002) and Charron (2016) argue, therefore, perceptions around the presence and severity of corruption can vary depending on external influencing factors, such as media attention, and the wider social and cultural norms of their environment. Heidenheimer (2002) uses the example of bribery in Southern Italian politics to highlight this argument, while a similar example in the context of sport would be pre-determined draws in chess, as discussed by Zaksaitė (2013). In her study, the author explains that a pre-determined draw in chess is considered common practice among players, especially in the beginning of stressful tournaments. As a result, what would be otherwise considered an act of corruption, the manipulation of a sport event or competition, is instead viewed as tolerable within this particular context.

Perceptions of corruption have thus been studied by acknowledging their subjectivity both within and beyond sport (Kulczycki & Königstorfer, 2016). Heidenheimer (2002) distinguished between black, grey, and white corruption to better conceptualise its perceived severity. His framework suggests that the perceived severity of an act depends on the element of punishability, with a direct analogy noted between the two. As such, an act is viewed as black corruption when the majority of people would be in favour of the corruptor’s punishment, white when the majority of people would be against their punishment, and grey when people would be split between the two decisions regarding the corruptors’ punishability. Taking Heidenheimer’s (2002) suggestion that corruption can be perceived differently into consideration in this study, one could argue that the potential adverse effects that corruption can have on society might also differ. In particular, in the context of sport where corruption can manifest in widely different forms, ranging from a minor individual transgression (Lee et al., 2016; Wilson et al., 2008), to severe organisation-wide malpractice (Boudreaux et al., 2016; Mason et al., 2006), any potential respective effects to social capital that this study aims to explore might indeed also vary.

Overall thus, this study aims to explore how different forms of manifested corruption, perceived at different levels of severity, might influence individuals’ social capital, as measured by the ONS. As such a wide spectrum of subjects, including those who are not actively engaged in sport participation or consumption, are studied, aiming for the exploration of a more representative sample of the wider population to which policy is aimed.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample and procedure

Participants were 678 (males = 286, females = 391, transgender = 1) British nationals aged between 18 and 71 who were invited to
participate in an online survey designed to examine their perceptions of current issues related to sport and society. Following ethical approval to conduct this study from an independent ethics committee (affiliated with the university of the first author), data were collected between 31 March 2018 and 19 April 2018. Participants were recruited through social media, with the help of a survey company which was able to post a link to the survey on their social media accounts (Twitter and Facebook) where a very large number of potential participants who met the criterion set in the study (i.e. being British nationals over 18 years old) could access it.

3.2. Study design

This study employed an experimental design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups. First, participants were asked to complete a short questionnaire based on the ONS questions on social capital, to gauge their levels of personal relationships and social support networks, collectively measured through the frequency of communication with relatives; civic engagement and trust, measured by the ability to have an influence on their local area; and trust in others and sports organisations. The questions used in our study were those developed and tested by the ONS (2017), which are also used by them on a regular basis to measure social capital in the UK. The questions used by the ONS were selected in order to ensure their validity and reliability to measure social capital in UK subjects. The items used in our study were: “How often do you communicate with relatives?” (personal relationships, Likert scale, 8 items, ranging from “every day” to “once a year”); “Would you say that most of the people in your neighbourhood can be trusted (trust, Likert scale, 4 items, ranging from ‘most of the people can be trusted’ to ‘no-one can be trusted’)?”; and “I can influence decision at my local area” (influence, Likert scale, 5 items, ranging from “totally agree” to “totally disagree”). Finally, in line with our study’s focus and the relevant ONS question on trust in government organisations, we included the question “Do you trust sport governing bodies/organisations?” to reflect on participants’ trust towards sport and the organisations that govern it (Likert scale, 5 items, ranging from “always” to “never”).

Second, depending on their group membership, participants were exposed to one of three widely published media sport articles focusing on incidents of corruption in sport in the UK. This was based on pilot testing (n = 13) and in accordance with Heidenheimer’s (2002) argument that perceptions of manifested corruption differ depending on their perceived severity. The cases are (in order of decreasing perceived severity) the alleged cover-up of sexual abuse in the Football Association – n = 167 (Taylor, 2016), the cover-up and perpetuation of bullying and a culture of fear in British Cycling – n = 170 (Roan, 2017) and the involvement in a betting activity from Sutton United’s FC goalkeeper, Wayne Shaw – n = 170 (Aarons, 2017). A summary of each of the cases presented to the participants in the three groups is provided in the Appendix. The participants were presented with a short news article detailing each case (depending on the group in which they were in) with no additional questions regarding the cases asked. The fourth group – the control group (n = 171) was not exposed to any stimulus. Third, after their exposure to their respective sport corruption case, all participants were instructed to complete the same ONS questions on social capital and trust in sport organisations again. In the case of the control group, this involved them filling in the same questions again without exposing them to any stimulus.

3.3. Data analyses

All analyses were executed with SPSS 26 software (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics were performed for the total sample and
for the four subsamples separately. To investigate how the perceived severity of integrity affects social capital and trust in sport organisations, three steps were taken. A similar approach has been used in previous sport integrity research (Constandt et al., 2019).

First, we considered the evolution in social capital scores between both measurement points for the different social capital items by running repeated measurements ANOVA’s. Within these repeated measurements ANOVA’s, the treatment group operated as a between-subjects factor. Repeated measurements ANOVA’s were also run for the control group to enable comparisons between exposure and non-exposure to a sport corruption case.

Second, we calculated a new variable, containing the residual change scores for these social capital items, by regressing the scores of the second measurement on those of the first measurement. These residual change scores are preferred over simple change scores, as they decrease the likelihood of auto-correlated error and regression to the mean effects (Van Dyck, Cardon, & De Bourdeaudhuij, 2017).

Third, multiple linear regression analyses were run to consider the potential influence of socio-demographic variables on the changes in social capital items. More precisely, the residual change scores for the social capital items operated as the dependent variable, whereas the socio-demographic variables gender (dummy variable), number of adults in one’s household, number of children in one’s household, frequency of active sport or physical activity participation, and frequency of passive sport consumption (e.g. watching on television, attending matches, buying merchandising) functioned as independent variables.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 provides detailed information concerning the socio-demographic constitution of this study’s sample (n = 867). As illustrated in this table, the total sample and all subsamples (i.e. the three treatment groups and one control group) were heterogeneous in terms of age, gender, marital status, employment status, number of adults in one’s household, number of children in one’s household, frequency of sport or physical activity participation, and frequency of passive sport consumption.

As shown in Table 2 – which displays the descriptive statistics (i.e. mean scores and standard deviations) for the measured social capital items – discrete changes in certain elements of social capital occurred between both measurements. For example, we can see a distinct difference between the two measurements in the trust people felt for sport organisations in all three treatment groups. As presented in Table 2, the cases represented in each intervention group are (in order of decreasing perceived severity) the alleged cover-up of sexual abuse in the Football Association (Taylor, 2016), the cover-up and perpetuation of bullying and a culture of fear in British Cycling (Roan, 2017), and the involvement in a betting activity from Sutton United’s FC goalkeeper, Wayne Shaw (Aarons, 2017).

4.2. Repeated measurements ANOVA

Repeated measurements were run for all scale social capital items as well as for trust in sport organisations. When it comes to the three treatment groups, a significant negative evolution (i.e. decreased social capital) was observed for trust in sport organisations (F(1,429) = 19.91, p < 0.05, η²p = 0.04), personal relationships with relatives (F(1,508) = 4.98, p < 0.05, η²p = 0.01), and trust in one’s neighbourhood (F(1,466) = 12.65, p = 0.00, η²p = 0.03), while no significant evolution was found for self-perceived influence on the local area. A moderation effect of the treatment group – included as an ordered treatment variable – was only found for trust in sport organisations (F(2,429) = 3.15, p = 0.01, η²p = 0.01), indicating that trust in
Table 1. Socio-demographic constitution sample (n = 678).

| Age cat.  | Total sample  
|          | (n = 678) | Treatment group 1  
|          | (n = 167) | Treatment group 2  
|          | (n = 170) | Treatment group 3  
|          | (n = 170) | Control group  
|          | (n = 171) |
| ------- | -------- | -------------- | -------------- | -------------- | ---------- | ---------- |
| 18–25   | 50       | 9             | 9             | 14            | 18         |
| 26–35   | 127      | 31            | 24            | 32            | 40         |
| 36–45   | 143      | 32            | 39            | 41            | 31         |
| 46–55   | 122      | 37            | 39            | 27            | 19         |
| 56–65   | 144      | 30            | 35            | 37            | 42         |
| ≥ 66    | 92       | 28            | 24            | 19            | 21         |
| Gender  |          |               |               |               |            |
| Male    | 286      | 60            | 74            | 77            | 75         |
| Female  | 391      | 107           | 96            | 93            | 95         |
| Trans/X | 1        | 0             | 0             | 0             | 1          |
| Marital status  |          |               |               |               |            |
| Single  | 157      | 35            | 40            | 39            | 43         |
| Married | 336      | 82            | 85            | 83            | 86         |
| Living with partner | 118  | 32            | 29            | 31            | 26         |
| Separated/divorced | 48   | 10            | 11            | 14            | 13         |
| Widowed | 19       | 8             | 5             | 3             | 3          |
| Employment  |          |               |               |               |            |
| (Self) employed | 410  | 105           | 103           | 103           | 99         |
| In education | 18   | 3             | 2             | 7             | 6          |
| Not in education or employment | 72   | 18            | 20            | 17            | 17         |
| Retired | 151      | 38            | 37            | 35            | 41         |
| Prefer not to say | 27   | 3             | 8             | 8             | 8          |
| # of adults in the household |          |               |               |               |            |
| 1       | 145      | 37            | 37            | 37            | 34         |
| 2       | 400      | 97            | 105           | 101           | 97         |
| 3       | 88       | 25            | 19            | 21            | 23         |
| 4       | 29       | 4             | 5             | 8             | 12         |
| 5       | 11       | 4             | 2             | 1             | 4          |
| 6       | 1        | 0             | 1             | 0             | 0          |
| 7       | 2        | 0             | 1             | 0             | 0          |
| 8       | 1        | 0             | 0             | 1             | 0          |
| 9+      | 1        | 0             | 0             | 0             | 1          |
| # of children in the household |          |               |               |               |            |
| 0       | 465      | 109           | 128           | 107           | 121        |
| 1       | 103      | 21            | 17            | 38            | 27         |
| 2       | 82       | 29            | 21            | 16            | 16         |
| 3       | 22       | 7             | 4             | 6             | 5          |
| 4       | 6        | 1             | 0             | 3             | 2          |
| Frequency of sport/PA engagement |          |               |               |               |            |
| Every day At least | 197 | 46            | 58            | 43            | 50         |
| twice a week At least | 124 | 35            | 30            | 32            | 27         |
| once a week Fortnightly | 28   | 9             | 9             | 3             | 7          |
| Once a month | 36   | 5             | 7             | 14            | 10         |
| Once every three months | 13   | 5             | 2             | 4             | 2          |
| Once every six months | 6    | 2             | 1             | 1             | 2          |
| Once a year | 12   | 4             | 0             | 5             | 3          |
| Never | 138      | 30            | 34            | 37            | 37         |
| Frequency of passive sport consumption |          |               |               |               |            |
| Every day At least | 139 | 35            | 34            | 33            | 37         |
| twice a week At least | 129 | 39            | 26            | 37            | 27         |
| once a week Fortnightly | 51   | 11            | 11            | 14            | 15         |
| Once a month | 67   | 20            | 14            | 14            | 19         |
| Once every three months | 41   | 7             | 11            | 15            | 8          |
| Once every six months | 31   | 6             | 9             | 6             | 7          |
| Once a year | 35   | 10            | 9             | 4             | 12         |
| Never | 127      | 28            | 40            | 27            | 32         |
sport organisations corrodes more strongly depending on the severity of the corruption case being confronted with. Regarding the control group, a significant negative evolution was examined for personal relationships with relatives ($F(1,171) = 8.23, p < 0.01, \eta^2_p = 0.05$), whereas no significant evolutions were exposed for trust in sport organisations, trust in one’s neighbourhood, and self-perceived influence on the local area.

### 4.3. Regression analyses

Residual change scores were calculated for the treatment groups for the two social capital items (i.e. trust in sport organisations and trust in one’s neighbourhood) that evolved in a significantly distinct way compared to our control group. Subsequently, two multiple linear regression analyses were run to target potential explanations for respectively the decreased trust in sport organisations and for the decreased trust in one’s neighbourhood. The first regression analysis showed a small yet significant influence of the frequency of passive sport consumption ($\beta = 0.05; p = 0.02$) on trust in sport organisations, indicating there is a positive link between engaging less with sport and decreased trust in sport organisations in our three treatment groups. The second regression analysis did not yield any significant results that could help explain the decreased trust in one’s neighbourhood.

### 5. Discussion and implications

This study explored the potential effects of exposure to different (severities of) corruption cases on social capital in the UK. The results indicate a general lack of evolution between the two measurements (before and after the exposure to a corruption case), suggesting that no changes to levels of personal relationships through social support networks, and civic engagement appear after the exposure to corruption. As a result, it could be suggested...

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**Table 2. Descriptive statistics social capital items.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intervention group #1</th>
<th>Intervention group #2</th>
<th>Intervention group #3</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>First measurement</strong></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in sport organisations</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency communication with relatives</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in one’s neighbourhood</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-perceived influence on the local area</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The mean scores for all four variables should be interpreted as follows: the higher the mean scores, the lower respondents’ trust in sport organisations, their frequency of communication with relatives, their trust in their neighbourhood, and their self-perceived influence on the local area.
that corruption in sport, regardless of its perceived severity, does not seem to affect these elements of social capital. However, the same conclusion cannot be drawn when considering the elements of trust. In contrast, the results indicate that corruption in sport can influence the trust people feel towards sport organisations and their own neighbourhood. In these cases, the findings suggest that trust is indeed corroded due to corruption in sport, with the participants that were exposed to incidents of corruption showing decreased levels of trust after the exposure, unlike the unaffected trust levels of the participants who were not. This leads to the following observations and theoretical and practical implications.

First, corruption in sport can corrode people’s trust towards sport organisations and thus the key stakeholders of the sport ecosystem, something that could have long-lasting effects on sport. As such, it could be argued that due to the increasing attention that media have been placing on communicating instances of corruption in sport, and the emergence of new incidents of corruption in sport, people’s exposure to such instances will continue to occur. This could raise long-standing problems for the credibility of the sport ecosystem and its ability to deliver sport to society, suggesting that a transparent, prompt and open response to corruption is needed by the key sport organisations involved. In other words, the findings of the study further stress the managerial implications that corruption in sport can have towards the key actors in the sport ecosystem, highlighting the need for them to act and respond.

Second, an analogy appears to exist between the perceived severity of corruption in sport and the corrosion of people’s trust towards sport organisations. As such, the higher the perceived severity, or greyness (according to Heidenheimer, 2002), of corruption, the higher the decrease in the trust people felt towards sport organisations, with higher levels of corrosion in the trust of the individuals exposed to the corruption case of high perceived severity, moderate levels of corrosion in the trust of those exposed to the case of moderate perceived severity, and lower levels of corrosion in the trust of those exposed to the case of low perceived severity. This finding aligns with previous research on the effects of the perceived severity of corruption on people’s perceptions (Manoli & Bandura, 2020), indicating that the perceived severity of corruption which is often overlooked, is to be taken into consideration in future studies. In practical terms, this suggests that when cases of severe corruption claims are raised it is important that commensurately strong responses are required through, for example, independent investigation, scrutiny and suggested resolution, in order to potentially limit or mitigate the negative repercussions they have on people’s trust.

Third, the results suggest that the urgency for, an incentive or mechanisms to bring about change may not exist within sport. The regression results indicated that greater engagement with sport reduced the decrease in trust following exposure to corruption. In other words, according to the findings, the fewer people engage with sport, the more their trust towards sport organisations decreased following the exposure, while the higher their engagement with sport was, the less their trust was affected. This would echo that as it has long been argued, sport can be highly engaging and captivating to its audience, capturing and maintaining people’s interest and generating strong emotions in its fans. This engagement, however, as the findings show, could potentially make sport fans more forgiving of corruption in sport, compelling them to turn a blind eye and ignore incidents of corruption in sport, limiting any effects on their feelings towards the organisations that govern it. In other words, by being lenient with sport organisations in light of corruption in sport, people who engage with sport give it little reason or motivation to fight corruption
and thus improve, sending the wrong message to sport administrators and policy-makers, and thus potentially damaging its own future. At the same time, in practical terms, this means that key sport organisations may not face “internal” incentives to fight corruption in sport, which suggests a need for external intervention and public scrutiny.

In terms of its theoretical implications, these findings would point towards the idea of sport fandom as a “veil” of forgiveness or lenience in terms of corruption in sport, suggesting that engagement with sport and sport fandom could assist in perpetuating corruption in sport. This study’s findings on the corrosion of trust in sport organisations due to sport corruption suggest that the more people engage with sport, the fewer effects are noted in regard to their trust towards sport organisations, hence the above implied “veil” of forgiveness or lenience of sport fans. While this finding aligns with previous studies arguing that fans do not really care about whether or not the leaders (e.g., coaches, managers, board members) of their favourite football club engage in ethical behaviour (Constandt et al., 2020), it also contradicts with studies highlighting the more negative attitude of highly involved supporters when compared to the attitude of low involvement supporters in the case of athlete transgressions (Sato et al., 2015). In this line, the findings would also contradict recent studies suggesting that ambi-fans, individuals who simultaneously follow and support two or more teams in one sport including teams that are potential rivals, should be the main focus of sport teams, since unlike highly identified fans, they tend to remain committed to teams despite their involvement in corruption (Sun et al., 2021). These mixed results on the impact of corruption in sport in relation to fandom, suggest that more work is required to deepen our understanding of the exact nature and extent of the consequences of corruption in sport and the role that sport fandom can play within it, which could have tangible contributions on the way in which sport is governed.

A result worthy of further discussion is the finding that the effects of corruption in sport do not seem to be contained within the sport ecosystem. The fact that people’s trust in their neighbourhood decreases due to the existence of corruption in sport would suggest that the widely praised role that sport can play in society can be affected by a lack of integrity. This finding contradicts Manoli, Bandura, and Downward’s (2020) argument that corruption in sport harms only sport itself, suggesting that a spill-over effect might, in fact, exist beyond sport and into the wider society. This suggests that while sport is often presented as a social “glue” with the potential to generate social good (Burnett, 2006; Darcy et al., 2014; Skinner et al., 2008), its role can, in fact, deviate from this and even result in the opposite effect, damaging or corroding the trust people feel beyond sport. This, in turn, raises questions about the continuous positive emphasis placed by public policy on the promotion of sport and the subsequent investment this emphasis has been paired with, especially in countries like the UK (Her Majesty’s Government, 2015). At the same time, it highlights the fact that public policy has neglected to critically reflect on the dark side of sport in their policy documents and discourse, and the potentially damaging effects it can have both within and beyond sport.

6. Limitations and further research

The study’s limitations need to be acknowledged along with suggestions for further research. First, the focus of this study is the UK context. As such, the implicit subjective ethical and cultural norms of the subjects will shape the way in which the corruption presented in the cases is perceived, which can, in turn, affect the potential generalisability of its findings to different contexts. However, through this exploratory study, our aim was
not to generalise the findings, but to shed light on whether and how corruption in sport could affect social capital in the UK, through an assessment of people’s personal relationships, social support networks, civic engagement and trust. Nonetheless the results offer a potential indication of the impacts from countries with similar contexts with comparable sport systems and government policies, while future research could explore the same question in similar or less similar contexts. Second, even though the cases used were widely publicised corruption cases in the UK, the limited exposure to them during this experimental study could have an effect on the responses given by the participants. Further research and a longitudinal study could also examine whether a longer exposure to corruption cases of varying perceived severity could yield similar or differing results.

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Appendix. Instances of corruption in sport in the UK

The alleged cover-up of sexual abuse in the Football Association (Taylor, 2016)
Former professional footballer Andy Woodward spoke up in 2016 about the abuse he suffered from one of his coaches when he was 11 years old. The coach of the footballer accused of sexual abuse had already spent years in prison and in treatment, after admitting to charges of sexual offences against young boys on numerous occasions. The former professional footballer argued that the club the coach was employed by, and the national governing body of football, the English Football Association, were aware of the coach’s behaviour and sexual offences against young boys he coached, and yet they chose to not act upon it and instead “covered it up”.

Cover-up and perpetuation of bullying and a culture of fear in British Cycling (Roan, 2017)
A report was made public in 2017, highlighting the existence of a culture of fear and bullying within British Cycling. According to the report, this culture was perpetuated within the governing body of cycling, since the focus was placed on achieving success and winning medals in international competitions. As such, it was argued that accusations and complaints about such behaviour were disregarded and not addressed. It was also argued that following external pressures, British Cycling had to address the report and its findings, while responding to the need for additional clarity on their practices and the alleged cover-up of damning accusations of bullying.

Involvement in betting activity from Sutton United’s FC goalkeeper, Wayne Shaw (Aarons, 2017)
Wayne Shaw was a semi-professional footballer who played as a goalkeeper for Sutton United FC. In 2017, during the team’s match against Arsenal FC, Shaw was seen eating a pie while sitting on the bench of the team. It was soon revealed that he was aware that a betting company had made a bet available on him eating a pie on television and as such he was investigated and consequently fined and banned by the Football Association for the possible breach of rules related to betting.