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Ludvigsen, J and Millward, P

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### Article

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## **Introduction**

This article brings to the fore the issue of 'security' at English Premier League (EPL) matches, and explores how these issues are played out in front of audiences across the world, and how supporters discuss/receive these actions and 'threats'. The relationship between 'security' and sport mega-events (SMEs) has gradually been given increased academic attention (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Yu *et al.*, 2009; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). In recent years, sports events of an international significance, such as the Boston Marathon (2013) and France's friendly game versus Germany at *Stade de France* (2015) have been targeted in terrorist attacks. This contributed to the already heightened focus on risks associated with SMEs in a post-9/11 world, including terrorism, 'hooliganism', crime and other forms for public disorder (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010). On May 15 2016 serious fears over the EPL being targeted erupted, when reports surfaced, asserting that the kick-off in Manchester United's game versus Bournemouth was delayed. Rapidly, news reports and social media updates revealed that a 'suspect package' had been found inside one of Old Trafford's toilets, and it was decided to abandon the game. Resultantly, a dramatic evacuation of more than 70,000 supporters inside the stadium had to be carried out, whilst a bomb disposal team was rushed to the stadium in order to perform a 'controlled explosion' of the suspicious-looking devise (BBC, 2016).

It was confirmed that the devise was a 'bomb-replica' deliberately designed to resemble of a 'real' explosive devise. It was accidentally left in a stadium toilet by a private security firm, which used Old Trafford for security exercises in the days before the game. The game itself, in which Manchester United won 3-1, was played approximately 48 hours following the incident. The result, however, was overshadowed by the chaotic occurrences, which gave solid indications of what 'could have been' – *if* the detected devise was not a 'dummy'. Further, the episode panned out at a time where sports events have been targeted and require large-scale security and policing efforts to mitigate risks and prevent possible threats (Yu *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, many of those supporters who just two days before were evacuated in a rush – in full belief that their 'security' was at stake – would be present at this game, which went on undisrupted though with a considerable lower attendance (Guardian, 2016). Importantly, such an incident in the context of the EPL is likely to have made an impression on the league's supporters generally, and not only on those present at Old Trafford, popularly nicknamed the 'theatre of dreams', on this day.

The actual significance of this incident *in per se*, and the importance of granting its surrounding fan discourses sociological examination is manifested in three social realities. Firstly, the EPL broadcast in 212 territories and boasts approximately 4.7 billion viewers each season (Author B). Each round of games is attended by more than 300,000 people in ten different stadiums across the UK (Giulianotti, 2011), whilst the league attracts huge global and local interest. Secondly, the incident occurred almost exactly six months following a terrorist attack aimed at a football match, when three suicide bombers struck outside *Stade de France* in November 2015. The events hence unfolded in a time period in which the ‘terror-sport’ ‘couplet’ was particularly relevant; and tense. Thirdly, stadium evacuations, fortunately, are not regular occurrences in the EPL. When they do occur however, they are likely to be discussed by supporters in both ‘offline’ and ‘online’ settings, where supporters commonly interact and discuss various facets of the game (Author A). Thus, this case illuminates a highly important episode in terms of EPL’s security, which generated huge public interest, and was followed by audiences across the globe as it developed.

Current research concerned with how spectators and supporters, who regularly attend sports events, perceive and respond to security issues is limited (Toohey & Taylor, 2008; Hassan, 2014). As Hassan (2014, p. 630) writes: ‘an often overlooked consequence of the potential threat of terrorist activity at major sporting events has been their impact when persuading potential attendees to refrain from travelling to such events’. Therefore, literature is yet to sufficiently appreciate this aspect of sports events security, despite the fact that security (and policing) efforts at SMEs, largely, are to ensure supporter safety (Coaffee & Murakami-Wood, 2006). In the aftermath of the mentioned *Stade de France* attack, there has been a heightened presence of security actors around football games.<sup>1</sup> Also in the EPL, games and the stadia represent securitized spaces with presence of police and stewards (Giulianotti, 2011; Author A, 2019).

Scholarly research on the EPL regularly examines supporters’ views and perceptions of their consumption of the sport (i.e. Author A, 2011; Petersen-Wagner, 2015; King, 2002). Here, however, it is seldom their versions of ‘security’ and ‘safety, in light of stadium presence, that is explored, with Cleland and Cashmore (2018) and Rookwood and Pearson’s (2010) study on fan perceptions of ‘hooligans’ serving exceptions. In the bigger picture, however, there is a need for commitment to the study of how EPL fans experience their own ‘safety’, and more broadly, security issues in a contemporary era of the EPL – where a significant number of fans have a weekly presence in the securitized stands (Giulianotti, 2011). This study therefore

seeks to answer the research question of how football supporters, during and in the immediate aftermath of the Old Trafford evacuation, responded to security and safety, under what Boyle and Haggerty (2012, p. 249) call ‘conditions of heightened uncertainty’. Through the investigation into, and by the answering of such question, this article makes an original contribution by the examination of the public’s discursive reflections about ‘security’ practices that affect their everyday practices, in an age wherein ‘security’, as a concept, and responses to – or for it, are subject to extensive public discourse and have far-reaching local and international implications (Zedner 2009; Coaffee & Murakami-Wood, 2006; Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010).

The article is divided into four sections. The second section reviews relevant literature concerning spectators’ responses to ‘security’ at SMEs. In the third section, the study’s methodological approach and theoretical considerations around the study’s frame analysis (Goffman, 1974) are explained and justified. The fourth section presents the results and discusses these in the context of the wider literature and theory. Here, the most frequently drawn upon ‘frames’ throughout the analysis are discussed. Lastly, the implications, conclusions and avenues for future research are forwarded. We argue that the supporters, following the incident, were satisfied over the policing and security efforts, despite some fans questioning how the ‘package’ went undetected in the first place. The supporters agreed that safety comes first and acknowledged how this incident could have ramifications for security at future events. Overall, these findings yield new ways of reading how football supporters – as a large group of people in a transnational society – talk about and experience ‘security’ in a post-9/11 world.

### **Literature Review: Spectators’ responses to ‘safety’ and security’**

In the period after 9/11, where security concerns over terrorism threats have increased, the SME and ‘security’ relationship has gradually become more academically recognized (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010; Boyle & Haggerty, 2012). The growing academic interest in SME security relates to the financial and human resources going into the security operations at contemporary SMEs, which include significant planning and large numbers of personnel. In the professional sports league this article focuses on, the EPL, the emphasis on security remains both highly valid and important, too. The EPL, however, is commonly not read as an SME in current scholarship (see Giulianotti, 2011, Author A). Yet, according to Giulianotti (2011), the EPL can be regarded a time and space diffuse SME – as opposed to the time and

space specific SMEs (i.e. Football World Cup and Olympics) that commonly are given the most attention in existing scholarship. This article subscribes to this unconventional reading of the EPL. It thereby draws largely upon SME literature and applies this to the EPL. This can also be justified since the EPL – broadly- share many of the same risks as other time/space specific SMEs, including ‘terrorists’ and ‘hooligans’ (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010).

Now, SMEs represent securitized climates. Therefore, existing studies have tended to look at historical incidents of sport-related terrorism (Galily *et al.* 2015; Spaaij, 2016), event-specific security apparatus (Coaffee *et al.*, 2011; Armstrong *et al.*, 2017), many whom of involving implementations of new, high-tech surveillance systems (Sugden, 2012; Armstrong *et al.*, 2017), but also security-related concepts such as ‘security legacies’ (Giulianotti, 2013; Eick, 2011) and ‘security networks’ (Whelan, 2014; Boyle, 2011). Some scholars investigate the mediation of security issues at SMEs (Atkinson & Young, 2012; Falcous & Silk, 2005). Overall, it is agreed that the field is growing and has several ‘emerging issues’, which Giulianotti and Klauser’s (2010) influential research agenda highlights.

A crucial component which comparatively has received substantially less academic attention, however, is spectators’ perceptions of ‘security’ and ‘safety’ (Toohey & Taylor, 2008; Hassan, 2014; 2016). This remains particularly remarkable, considering that security measures at SMEs have far-reaching, diverse social effects (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010) and are taken, primarily, to ensure ‘safe events’ for spectators. Moreover, previous scholarship has inquired for investigations into the social consequences and costs of SME securitization (Yu *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, spectators, or supporters, as this study refer to them as – will frequently be reminded through the media about risks associated with (potential) event attendance (Atkinson & Young, 2012).

In a time where sporting events occasionally have been affected by both terrorism and ‘hooliganism’; which receives intense media coverage (*ibid.*), and where security policies are increasingly pre-emptive and precautionary before SMEs (Coaffee & Murakami-Wood, 2006), supporters attending SMEs, like the EPL, will make important reflections on their ‘security’ and physical ‘safety’ when deciding (whether) to attend (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). It is in gathering these reflections, existing scholarship becomes inadequate. In fact, Toohey and Taylor (2008, p. 451), who are the key contributors in this sub-field of SME studies, argued a decade ago that research addressing event spectators’ perceptions of terrorism was limited. As they have argued, ‘further research into emotional responses at sport events is

needed to better explore the underlying complexities and relationships of the various reactions' (Taylor & Toohey, 2007, p. 111). Such view is echoed by Shipway (2018, p. 268), the latter asserting that event spectators' perspectives on safety and security is an area that 'certainly merit a more comprehensive investigation in future years'.

Toohey and Taylor's scholarship, nonetheless, remains among the only existing studies addressing this. Through a series of studies in the early 2000s – at three different SMEs – attendees' perceptions of safety, risk and terrorism were examined. Overall, the studies show that attendees felt safe, whilst terrorism did not deter attendance to any significant level. Few spectators considered not attending over terrorism concerns (Taylor & Toohey, 2006; 2007; Toohey *et al.*, 2003; Toohey & Taylor, 2008). However, it is observable in the three studies conducted on SMEs in South Korea/Japan (2002), Australia (2003) and Greece (2004), that there was a small, gradual increase in insecurity perceptions towards the last event. From the studies, it is also found an inter-play of emotions and risk perceptions in attendee responses to the threat of terrorism. Aside from notable exceptions (i.e. George & Swart, 2015; Cleland and Cashmore, 2018), similar research has failed to reappear, despite claims that terrorism concerns have affected attendance on sporting events. In their sociological study of fan responses to 'security', 'surveillance' and 'risk', Cleland and Cashmore (2018) make findings suggesting that match-goers expect, desire and accept additional security at professional sports events. Some supporters, however, would claim overly excessive and intrusive security impeded their match-day experiences. Whilst this study, in particular, yield new ways of understanding 'security' at SMEs, it is crucial that the lack of research also applies to the EPL, where it not only is a lack of research on the league's securitization, and effects of this, but also on what supporters say about 'safety' and 'security' in a post-9/11 event setting.

This evident gap in the sociological literature is central here. By following the reading of the EPL as a time/space diffuse SME (Giulianotti, 2011), and Giulianotti and Klauser's (2010) encouragement for a sociological focus to the study of the diverse social effects of event securitization, and then adding this with the arguments Toohey and Taylor repeatedly articulate - and what the review of pre-existing literature reveals, there is certainly plausibility to the following argument. This argument holds that examining perceptions of security and safety amongst supporters in the EPL must be considered highly necessary. The EPL is a league that involves larger security and policing efforts over 38 match-days per season and a fixture list stretching from August to May. Almost weekly, ten games are played at ten different stadiums across the UK (Giulianotti, 2011). Although incidents of terrorism and

'hooliganism' are rare, these are manifested threats that have influenced and still influence the league's securitized nature. Historically, this has seen the league implement a number of security-related policies and legislations, all-seater stadia, highly sophisticated surveillance systems, as well as body and bag searches of supporters upon entrance (Giulianotti, 2011; Giulianotti & Armstrong, 1998). Moreover, security developments and issues are likely to have made an impact on supporter experiences (Edensor, 2014). Therefore, their perceptions of 'security' could be deemed crucial to gather, whilst supporters, in this context, deserve a voice and sufficient academic attention.

In this sense, this study seeks to examine responses to 'security' and 'safety' as articulated on an online message board, following the episode that evoked fear at – and outside – Old Trafford. Albeit the 'package' fortunately never materialized, and was a 'false alarm', the incident arguably played a pivotal role in *reminding* supporters of risks associated with match attendance. Also, from the early reports surfaced, and the evacuation (around 3:00pm) until it was confirmed that the device was eliminated in a 'controlled explosion' (at 4:30pm) (BBC, 2016), supporters had little knowledge and overview over the situation and how it would unfold.

Hence, the Old Trafford evacuation serves as an important case; central when concerned with enhancing our knowledge on this particular (sub)-field of study. Fortunately, such episodes are rare in the EPL. Yet, this simultaneously means utilizing cases wherein fans are likely to have discussed security-related concerns and thoughts is crucial, as supporters will express desires to watch sports in 'safe environments', free from 'hooligans', 'terrorists' disorder or stadiums suffering from structural weaknesses (King, 2002; Toohey & Taylor, 2015). Collection of responses to security in relation to the 'false alarm' at Old Trafford can thus be considered important, with this representing a significant, contemporary security-related occurrence in the EPL. The case remains of particular interest if one is to advance the field of study concerned with supporters' responses to 'security'.

### **Method and Theoretical Position**

This study's data is collected from an online message board where football supporters discuss and interact in an online setting. Although user details and demographics cannot be checked to any level of 'full' certainty, it was the case throughout the data collection, that some usernames and comments implied that a key population of the study were Manchester United supporters. Nonetheless, the forum is publicly upon for both insight and registration.

Consequently, fans from other, even rival clubs, may have contributed with fan comments. This may, as Author B writes, threaten the ‘shared cultural understanding’ of the fan group of concern, since supporters of other teams may join the message board solely to provoke the majority. However, this study is concerned with how football supporters talk about security, rather than how club-specific set of supporters talk about security. Also, rival or neutral users do commonly participate on other clubs’ message boards for a fair, honest and objective debate. Therefore, they do not merely contribute as forum ‘troublemakers’. Additionally, these may be active match-goers in the EPL, too. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that this is one caveat when collecting such data. Therefore, it cannot be this study’s intention to generalize one set of fans’ – or more broadly – EPL supporters’ responses to ‘security’. Instead, an exploratory approach to the investigation of EPL supporter responses to ‘security’ and ‘safety’ was taken, to fill a lacuna in the literature.

Gibbons and Dixon (2010) suggested that carefully reading football fans’ online discourses enables better understanding of how football contributes to maintaining social identities in contemporary England. Indeed, research by Author A, Author B, Ruddock (2005), Petersen-Wagner (2015) and Cleland and Cashmore (2016, 2018) has utilised data collection methods in this way. Drawing upon fan talk articulated on online message boards, enables analyses of supporters’ discussions, opinions and reactions to happenings in the ‘football world’ in real-time. In this case, this involves reflections upon issues around security and safety at games, as the Old Trafford evacuation, unsurprisingly, became subject to (online) discussion. Broadly, such discussions are not the most common on football message boards, unless specific situations unfold that allows for it, as is the case here. This justifies looking towards a ‘thread’ addressing the relevant incident.

One ‘thread’; a series of discursive comments, addressing the Old Trafford evacuation was purposively selected. This thread began when the security ‘threat’ was announced and continued to encompass 961 posts that assumed the bomb to be ‘real’ from the moment the evacuation was reported before another 1152 posts were delivered on it after it was announced to be a hoax. Overall, 2113 comments were collected. No other threads were selected, since this was the main thread wherein the incident was discussed, whilst forum moderators, commonly, will be regulating forums, so that several ‘threads’ discussing the same match, player or general topic are not created by users. Typically, if several ‘threads’ are established dealing with the same overarching topic, they will be merged. Although the believed threat turned out *not to be* ‘real’, many of the responses were posted when many



presumed the ‘suspect package’ was; since nothing was confirmed by the police or Manchester United until around 4:30pm (BBC, 2016). Further, the episode served as an ‘eye-opener’ for supporters, even after the ‘falseness’ of the ‘bomb’ was confirmed. Throughout the data analysis, however, comments considered ‘off-topic’, like embedded tweets, ‘gifs.’, isolated ‘emoji’-replies, memes and other ‘irrelevant’ posts for this study’s overarching topics were disregarded. This type of data cleaning can be justified because many posts within a thread drift off-topic. A high number of posts overall, does not automatically translate to a high qualitative value or data. Message boards are unpredictable and discussions may for longer periods take new and unexpected turns. Overall, we were left with a sample size of 195 posts.

Although this method does not intrude with, nor affect those subject to research, which is an advantage, certain ethical issues are involved (Author B). And importantly, the selected message board was open for public insight, contribution and comments that were collected may be considered publicly available in a public domain. This, users are made aware of upon registration. And ultimately, it can be strongly argued that this sort of material, similarly to Twitter material, which Murthy (2018) writes on, is a form of micro-publishing. We follow this suggestion. This means participants’ informed consent is highly impracticable in such research, where one should avoid interference with users. Moreover, partial consent would break up the discourse so that it no longer could be influenced by Goffman’s (1974) work which we discuss next. Secondly, with regards to user identities, they are at all times protected to ensure confidentiality. In this case, so is the message board’s name. Importantly, only a very small minority of collected posts will be cited here and when/if quoted, users are anonymized through provided pseudonyms.

### ***Frame analysis***

The purposively sampled data was analyzed using a frame analysis technique instigated by social theorist Erving Goffman (1974). Similarly to Goffman’s other theories, frame analysis is positioned as socially constructivist, and it emphasizes both the complexity of interaction and human interaction as a result of social action. In his work, *Frame Analysis: an essay on the organization of experience*, Goffman outlined the methodological need for looking at the ways individuals organize their unique experiences into meaningful activities and thereby create clear foundation of their reality (1974, p. 21).

Goffman did this by focusing on letters that were published in newspapers. He therefore recognized that, in discourses, certain segments were more heavily weighted than other parts of the same discourse. For Goffman, these are ‘frames’. Frames are the organizational principles that govern events and our subjective involvement of them, and are utilized by individuals to define and create discourses revolving a specific situation or topic, so these discourses subsequently become meaningful, turning ‘what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful’ (ibid.).

As Author B writes, there are two extreme interpretations of this method. The first interpretation uses frame analysis quantitatively – not too dissimilar from a content analysis, whilst the second interpretation maintains a qualitative focus, relatively similar to discourse analysis. Yet, ‘most’ interpretations fall between these two, he notes (Author B). This allows for a combination of qualitative and quantitative research (Author B). Herein, statistical methods were used during collection, when counting each ‘frame incident’ into the relevant frame. Then, the frames *most frequently* drawn upon were taken ‘further’ for more detailed discussion with a focus on its qualitative content.<sup>2</sup> Author A analysed the data according to four frames that emerged in the analysis. Reliability in the process was enhanced by Author B also analysing a sample sub-set of 20 posts (or 10 per cent of the sample) to strengthen the accuracy of the frame analysis process. There was a strong level of initial inter-coder reliability but this process allowed us to agree on the use of frames and revisit the earlier analysis. The results surfacing from the data analysis will now be presented and discussed.

## **Results**

In this section, the frames most frequently drawn upon throughout data collection are discussed further. As stated, statistical underpinnings inform what is now qualitatively discussed. The following frames are presented and elaborated upon. First, ‘positive appraisals of security and policing efforts’ (24%), second, comments articulating that ‘safety comes first’ (19%), third, discourse ‘questioning the security management and checks inside stadiums’ (16%), and finally, comments that ‘draw links between the Old Trafford incident and future security measures at major sport events’ (9%).

### ***Positive appraisals of security and policing efforts***

The frame most frequently drawn upon was the frame comprised with comments that positively appraised the policing and security efforts at Old Trafford on the match-day. 24 percent of analyzed posts were recorded in this frame. The supporters, some of them whom

had been present at Old Trafford – and the majority whom had not – were seemingly impressed with how well the evacuation was conducted, and applauded security personnel and the police for their judgement, the decision and practice of evacuation, and for locating the ‘suspect package’. Examples can be seen in the following comments:

Supporter (1): Wow. Hope it's just a precaution and nothing more. Right call if there's even a slight doubt though so well done to the Old Trafford security team.

Supporter (2): Great job to the police and security. Forget 4th place and all of that BS. Everyone at OT be safe and stay safe!!!

Supporter (3): To be honest, seeing that bomb disposal van rolling into Old Trafford sent a horrible shiver down my spine. [...] Kudos to the stewards, club security and the police.

Supporter (4): To be honest today made me less scared because the police and terror squad in this country really are doing their job incredibly well. The evacuation was pulled off with such effieceancy [sic: efficiency] and no one was hurt.

Supporter (5): Fair play to the police to handling this well it seems. Disappointed the game is abandoned, was quite looking forward to it. Undoubtedly the correct decision to do so however

Comments made on 15 May 2016.

Security actors and agencies at SMEs are commonly blamed if things go ‘wrong’ (Fussey & Coaffee, 2012). Following the incident at Old Trafford, however, the police and security’s effective handling of the situation was appraised. As supporter (4) note, the whole situation just made her/him ‘less scared’, and reinforced the trust this user had in the police and anti-terror squad, who here, did the job ‘incredibly well’. The stadium evacuation itself, was allegedly maneuvered efficiently and this, supporters express gratitude over. The frame suggests that, despite concerns about heightened security (at SMEs) potentially ruining or impeding the ‘spirit of the game’ (Coaffee *et al.*, 2011, p. 312), supporters and spectators of sport events of an international significance appreciate the fact that the security are present and evidently do not take this for granted. As evidence suggests, a number of supporters responded positively towards stadium security and policing efforts, in this case.

### ***Safety comes first***

The second most employed frame was the ‘safety comes first’ frame, comprised with comments articulating, in any way, that matters of ‘security’ and ‘safety’ must be prioritized over permitting the game between Manchester United and Bournemouth to be played as normal. Following 9/11, security policies have become more proactive and pre-emptive of nature (Coaffee & Murakami-Wood, 2006; Zedner, 2009), and the Greater Manchester Police together with Manchester United quickly decided to take no unnecessary risks by postponing

the match, with the unclear situation arising from the ‘package’. This decision, fans were satisfied with – and supported - as it demonstrated that fellow football supporters’ security and safety was taken seriously. The coherent acceptance of ‘safety’ and ‘security’ coming at the cost of a game can be viewed in the following comments:

Supporter (6): You can't take risks on people's security. If there is a suspect package on site then the game cannot be played until its found.

Supporter (7): I hope everything's ok and it's just precaution. It's just football, safety comes first.

Supporter (8): Hopefully its just a question of being extra safe. If someone has managed to sneak a bomb into OT [sic: Old Trafford], gonna have to seriously question going to the Euros.

Supporter (9): In a way it's remarkable that this is the first time that we've had something like this happen - since the threat of terrorism really came on the agenda over the last 15 years or so, something like this has always been a danger. No chances can be taken, and all precautions are necessary.

Comments made 15 May 2016.

Here, the quoted supporters agree that safety comes before the game of football, whilst underlining that it is not worth taking any unnecessary chances. Further, it is observable how one supporter seems somewhat skeptical ahead of the 2016 ‘Euros’, and how the incident would impact her/his intentions to attend this SME. Importantly, as Supporter (9) points out, a full-scale evacuation of Old Trafford is not a common practice. In fact, it was the first time it had happened in a post-9/11 setting. Neither are such incidents in any ways normal in the EPL, more generally. Most fans displayed full understanding of the postponement of the game, and as Supporter (7) effectively puts it: ‘it’s just football, safety comes first’.

In a previous study, one respondent at the Athens Olympics (2004) asserted that ‘sport is a target – take precautions’ (Taylor & Toohey, 2007, p. 109). As this frame proves, many supporters, fully in line with Cleland and Cashmore’s (2018) key findings, recognize, understand and accept when a precautionous decision was taken, by abandoning the game at Old Trafford – and trust law enforcements and the club to make the correct call. From Taylor and Toohey’s (2007) study, it could perhaps be expected that some supporters would articulate responses in which they would not potential terrorism prevent them from ‘getting on with’ their daily lives (ibid.). In this isolated case, however, the consensus was that supporters’ safety must be prioritized before football, until the situation was clarified. This meant the match took place two days later, which was likely to cause some inconvenience, especially for travelling supporters of both the home and away team. Even after it was announced that the

'suspect package' was forgotten by a private security company, one supporter backed the made decision(s):

Supporter (10): These days, with 75 thousand in the crowd and with what happened in France, regardless that it has now been found out to be a fake training exercise [sic: exercise] pretend bomb, it was still the right thing to do (16 May 2016).

### ***Questioning the security management and checks inside stadiums***

EPL games and its stadia are highly securitized spaces (Giulianotti, 2011). Since the 1980s, increased focus on security at grounds have seen the installation of close-circuit television (CCTV) and high-tech surveillance systems at modern EPL grounds (Giulianotti and Armstrong, 1998), which have become increasingly panopticed. Match-goers are subject to rigorous surveillance, whilst bags and individuals commonly are searched by stewards and/or other security staff in the turnstiles before entering the stands (Stott *et al.*, 2008). Notwithstanding, certain supporters in this study question the security practices inside the football stadia, and articulate that they are dissatisfied with current security checks in the EPL. As Supporter (11) acknowledges, however, with a high volume of fans – particularly in the last minutes before kick-off – security staff at EPL arenas face a challenging task.

Supporter (11): I have always questioned the ease at entering the stadium. I know they have a quick look through your bags but with so any [sic: many] people it's impossible to do a thorough job on every one.

Supporter (12): How are any of us surprised by this? The supposed 'security' staff checking punters going into the ground all year are a joke (Comments posted 15 May 2016).

Here, Supporter (12) characterize the security checks at Old Trafford throughout the season as a *'joke'*, and consider it unsurprising that it was made errors that meant the 'package' went undetected until kick-off. In that sense, the fans' reactions towards security managers were not merely positive and accepting. However, as the news broke and it was announced that the 'fake bomb' was accidentally left by a security company who had used Old Trafford for an exercise – certain fans expressed dissatisfaction with how the 'fake bomb' located in one of the toilets had not been detected in the days from the exercise, up until kick-off time, as the posts below shows:

Supporter (13): It's a bad sign that there were seemingly no (or at least insufficient) checks between then and now, but if an external firm failed to keep track of their equipment then that's their [...] fault. (15 May 2016).

Supporter (14): It's a bit worrying the device went undetected until after the stadium filled up. Be interesting to know how long it went unnoticed. (16 May 2016).

Supporter (13) clearly questions the quality of checks at the stadium – although s/he blames the security firm for leaving the ‘fake bomb’ behind. Similar views are shared by Supporter (14) who considers this to be ‘worrying’. To a certain degree, some of the posts in this frame correspond with how spectators in Taylor and Toohey’s (2007) study from the Athens Olympics – an event occurring without any incidents – expressed concerns that security checks were not carried out professionally and seriously (2007: 109), whilst the importance of using sufficiently trained security was stressed (ibid.). In a different study looking at attendees’ responses to security, at the 2003 Rugby World Cup, it was suggested by one spectator that in order to enhance security, it should be ensured that ‘safety protocols are taken seriously and not just there "for show"’ (Taylor and Toohey, 2006, p. 264).

‘Security’ at modern SMEs involves standardized practices (Yu *et al.*, 2009), and in the EPL, every game includes considerable policing and security efforts inside and around the grounds (Stott *et al.*, 2008; Garland & Rowe, 1999; Frosdick, 2005). In 2008/09 an average round of the EPL was watched by an average of 350,000 people in ten different stadiums (Giulianotti, 2011). As the fan comments recorded in this frame indicate, however, the Old Trafford evacuation and the device which caused the evacuation made some fans question the *quality* and comprehensiveness of security checks. This includes checks on individuals entering stadiums, and rooms/spaces within the stadium, as the supporters, arguably stress the need for *thorough* searches at stadium, although this involves certain practical difficulties given the high numbers of spectators at the grounds.

#### ***Links drawn between the Old Trafford incident and future security measures at SMEs***

Certain forum users would draw parallels between the Old Trafford incident and enhanced security at future SMEs. As documented, incidents at SMEs, and incidents of terrorism more generally, caused a heightened focus on event security (Hassan, 2016). This means higher security budgets (Giulianotti & Klauser, 2010) and more media focus on SME security (Atkinson & Young, 2012), as evident post-9/11 and post-*Stade de France*. Some supporters in this study also note how the ‘suspect package’ may have consequences for security at future events, such as supporter (15) who believe event security will be ‘tighter’, whilst supporter (16) suggests future European events may resemble of what has been described in literature as ‘total security’ (Bennett & Haggerty, 2011). Events that would take place shortly after the Old Trafford incident, such as the FA Cup Final (Wembley), where Manchester United faced Crystal Palace and the Euro 2016 (France) were pointed out as events where ‘security’ would be heightened:

Supporter (15): Security will be a 100 times tighter now. I think the only way it will affect the final [sic: FA Cup final, May 21 2016] is that the fans will probably have to turn up earlier as it may take longer to enter the stadium with checks and searches etc.

Supporter (16): I've heard reports that they conducted very tight security checks at any event held by a Presidential nominee which meant hours upon hours of queuing. I fear sports events in Europe could be headed in the same direction.

Supporter (17): Security cordons and scanners miles from the stadium I would guess. I'd expect the Euros will be very much like an airport in terms of security. Of course that does mean a lot of people getting stopped and built up but it's an unavoidable thing (Above comments made 15 May 2016).

Supporter (18): [...] Means more security at stadiums. The days of knocking back a few pints and rolling into the stadium a few minutes before kickoff will be over. (May 15 2016).

Particularly noteworthy here, is Supporter (18); who sees more 'security' as incompatible with what may be 'authentic' match day experiences – here, in form of socialization and consuming alcohol before games, and entering the stadium shortly before kick-off (Pearson & Sale, 2011). Fans will highlight their desires to have 'authentic' match-experiences when attending EPL fixtures (Author B; Petersen-Wagner, 2015). Yet, practices contributing to such experiences may be impacted by more thorough searches in turnstiles. Further, one user speculates over the incident may leading to a 'clamp-down' which will see ticket-holders required to carry an ID-card with their tickets. Naturally, this resembles of the securitization move and proposal by Margaret Thatcher and her government in the late 1980s, during the crackdown on 'hooliganism' (Lyon, 1991). Supporter (19), meanwhile, believes future events will see higher number of fan checks:

Supporter (19): Think this could lead to a clamp-down in all ticket holders needing matching ID with tickets in the future which would be kind of crap for those who can't make games but understandable at the same time (15 May 2016).

Supporter (20): That's definitely poor to say the least, and the number of checks carried out as standard will definitely be changing now! (16 May 2016).

Some supporters therefore acknowledge that the incident may significantly change the security practices at future events they intend to attend. As visible, this may be synonymous with longer queues and altered match-day experiences. This, these fans are aware of – yet they arguable show an understanding of this, such as supporter (19) who sees negative sides of a potential (fan) ID-card, but still recognizes possible benefits. As another supporter commented: 'Security must be top notch. Its [sic: it is] the world we live in now' (Supporter (21), 15 May 2016).

### **Discussion: ‘Just a matter of time’**

The previous frames represented those that were most drawn upon. Yet, there are also other findings that warrant some consideration. In spite of the frames unpacked above, it is also worth noticing that very few supporters would express or articulate in any way that the situation had created levels of fear to the extent of which it had put them off from attending future events. In sum, merely six fans would express such hints. This may correlate with the fact that some of these supporters were not physically present at Old Trafford themselves, although some supporters, in fact, hinted that they had been. Overall, this corresponds accurately with Taylor and Toohey’s (2006) study, where the threat of terrorism, generally, was not seen to deterring attendance nor ability to enjoy the event, although some fans felt reduced enjoyment. As details were uncovered and it became more transparent what had actually happened – the discussion would largely turn towards who was ‘to blame’; whether it was the club or the private security company, who had forgot the ‘fake bomb’ following their training.

Nevertheless, one finding from this study is that fans – although not deterred – do acknowledge, and seemingly have accepted and come to terms with that sports events, such as the EPL, are possible targets. They are seemingly aware that SMEs are bound to certain risks. The Old Trafford incident is likely to have reinforced such viewpoints, but particularly, in the light of attack outside *Stade de France*, six months before, we may spot a realization and anticipation that similar scenes can take place at future events. Indications of this are visible below:

Supporter (22): After the events at the match in Paris and now this, you have to think it's just a matter of time before something does happen inside a stadium.

Supporter (23): There was always going to be a worry about the Euros, especially since the Paris attacks. But the security there is going to be absolutely insane, as it should be.

Comments posted 15 May 2016.

Cleland and Cashmore (2018) find that for some fans, the *Stade de France* attack represented a ‘wake-up call for the overall management of security at football’ (p. 460). This is supported by our findings suggesting that the attacks in Paris impacted the ways in which ‘security’ and risk were viewed in relation to matches. Moreover, the comment offered by Supporter (23) is noteworthy. Not only does s/he accept the new routines of ‘security’ performance, s/he appears to embrace them (‘insane, as it should be’).<sup>3</sup> The fact that very few fans expressed any form for ‘panic’ or excessive fear, by for instance, dropping hints they would not attend future



games, in addition to the comments above, makes it possible suggest that fans have become somewhat more used to a heightened security apparatus related to SMEs.

This can be connected to how a majority of supporters appreciated and expressed gratitude towards security staff at Old Trafford. Supporters seemingly recognize that events are sites 'at risk', which they of course, also are reminded of through the media (Atkinson & Young, 2012). Especially before big sports events, the media is found to be both 'catastrophe-forecasting' and 'fear brokering' (ibid., p. 289). 'Security' is thus deemed a necessary feature, which is acknowledged and appreciated. However, as the fans questioning the Old Trafford's security management suggest, this also means high standards are set and required for security 'actors' and the police to meet at SMEs.

### **Conclusion**

This article provides an examination into football supporters' responses to 'security' through an investigation of a contemporary case, in which the EPL's biggest stadium, Old Trafford, was evacuated just minutes before kick-off in a league game between home side Manchester United and Bournemouth, May 15 2016. Generally, responses to 'safety' and 'security' from supporters (or spectators) who regularly attend SMEs have been neglected and received scarce scholarly attention (Toohey & Taylor, 2008). This, in spite of the fact that SMEs involve large-scale security operations aiming to delivering safe events, whilst terrorist attacks and outbreaks of 'hooliganism' have been apparent at recent SMEs (Cleland and Cashmore, 2018; O'Boyle & Kearns, 2017). In this vein, this study explores online supporter comments discussing the Old Trafford evacuation.

From the frame analysis (Goffman, 1974), it emerged how a large group of supporters in this study praised the security personnel and the police for acting in a professional, appropriate and effective manner when the evacuation became a reality. However, there were some critical voices questioning the security management and checks at the stadium, which 'allowed' the situation to arise in the first place. Moreover, the supporters this study draws upon, are uniform in that they expressed that the decision of postponing the game and evacuating was correct. They agreed that matters of safety and security comes before football. Finally, a number of supporters saw the link between this incident and enhanced security apparatuses and more rigorous checks at upcoming events. In this isolated case, where the outcome was no injuries nor fatalities, as the 'bomb' was 'fake', trust was reinforced in law enforcements.

The study's findings contribute and add new knowledge to the limited scholarship in which supporters' reflections on 'security' are examined (Cleland & Cashmore, 2018; Taylor & Toohey, 2006; Toohey & Taylor, 2007, 2008, Toohey *et al.*, 2003). Hence, adopting a frame analysis pioneered by Erving Goffman (1974), we provide robust qualitative evidence and analysis – coded into a statistical frame analysis – of a recent security issue with importance in the EPL, which is the most mediated football league in the world and consumed by a global mass-audience in real-time (Author A). Albeit the 'fake bomb' turned out to be a 'hoax' – this still represented a serious wake-up call for many supporters, not only in Manchester or Bournemouth, but across local and global fan communities given the the league's actions being heavily mediated (Author B). Further, it all unfolded just months following the *Stade de France* attack. Supporters make up important reflections upon their 'security' associated presence at EPL games. These have rarely been gathered in this way before and in the context of the EPL. In an age where the concept of 'security' at sports events – but also more generally in other domains of the contemporary societies - receives higher volumes of recognition both in public and academic spheres (Coaffee & Murakami Wood, 2006; Zedner, 2009), gathering supporters own accounts of 'security', 'safety' and 'risk' – as has been done here – must be deemed indispensable.

Limitations arrive with this study. The study merely examines one incident where a safety alarm went off in the EPL. That makes it impractical to draw any firm generalizations with regards to how supporters talk about security. As stated, any club or supporter specific generalizations cannot be drawn, since forum users may support different times and consume the EPL in different ways, either 'offline' and 'online'. These limitations however, do not strip off this article's validity. We yield relevant, significant and important findings on a severely under-researched area, namely on how football supporters respond to security issues. Additionally, it is likely to be differences in how supporters experience this episode from the 'outside' (or 'virtually'), and how those present at Old Trafford conceived the situation. Some supporters hinted that they were present at the stadium during the evacuation, but the study cannot account for the experiences who were *at* Old Trafford as the chaos unfolded. With this in mind, the research also seems to suggest that supporters not only accept the new routines and practices of 'security' but also welcome them - perhaps as a response to an era in which security threats are a central dimension of news reports (Atkinson & Young, 2012). This finding is tentative but clearly merits further consideration in future research.

The article examines how a number of football supporters in an online-setting reflected upon ‘security’ in a time wherein a league (and a team) they actively follow was threatened by a ‘suspect package’. Future research should continuously gather security responses from event spectators, and hereinafter, not confine itself to events where a threat actually materialized. Also events subject to – and impacted by – ‘false alarms’ are important to give consideration. Especially in an age where ‘a ring of steel’, ‘security spectacles’ (Boyle & Haggerty, 2012) and ‘security theatres’ (Zedner, 2009, p. 22) are some of the buzzwords associated with sports events and their spaces.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This was for example visible during the Euro 2016, where France, which was currently under a state of emergency, would deploy up to 100,000 police, soldiers and private security personnel. See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/football/2016/05/30/euro-2016-the-five-key-areas-that-french-security-effort-will-fo>

<sup>2</sup> For a longer discussion, see Author B.

<sup>3</sup> Supporter (23)'s comment also presented methodological tensions in the coding of qualitative material such as this as we wondered could also fit into the “Draws links between the Old Trafford incident and future security measures at SMEs” frame. There is a justification rather than an objective answer to this tension which is that each comment only counted once in the sample to ensure that it did not gather increased quantitative weight for a single comment and that it was placed in this category. This is because Supporter (23), seemingly, draws a link between a heightened security apparatus (expected) in ‘Euro 2016’ and coordinated terrorist attacks that took place in the French capital, only months before this event, rather than the Old Trafford incident.

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