

Distinctions in environmental attitudes between soccer and American football fans

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Abstract

Purpose – In this study, the authors examine consumer attitudes toward a professional soccer club's proenvironmental initiatives and evaluate whether key themes are consistent with those found in previous research of fans in different sporting contexts.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors analyzed empirical material provided by 147 highly identified supporters of a Major League Soccer team. Using template analysis, the authors compared codes, categories and themes with those previously identified in a reference group of National Football League (NFL) fans.

Findings – Twenty-three preliminary codes, nine categories and four themes were established by the researchers. Three themes – Considering Environmental Action, Business Insights and Impacting the Fan Experience – were all consistent with the NFL reference group. A fourth theme, Public Visibility, focused on the possibility that the club's proenvironmental initiatives could provide a competitive advantage over rival cities and positively influence local programming and behaviors.

Originality/value – The results of this study support the notion that fan characteristics may differ across various demographic and structural contexts and fans' recognition that a club could leverage its community standing to promote proenvironmental action.

Keywords Sustainability, Sport ecology, Marketing, Major League Soccer, National Football League

Paper type Research paper

Today, climate change and environmental sustainability are considered politically charged topics (Casper *et al.*, 2021). As a result, some high-profile professional sport clubs may avoid promoting environmental causes out of apprehension of the controversy that could ensue (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020). The source of this hesitancy is largely anecdotal; the perceived politics of climate action has been buoyed by news media and partisan talking points rather than clubs' own market research. Meanwhile, the effects of the global climate crisis continue to be felt, both in general and on sport organizations, athletes and events (McCullough, 2021; Orr, 2021). Despite relatively low levels of proenvironmental messaging among sport organizations (Kellison and Kim, 2014), some clubs have begun engaging fans in campaigns that stress the importance of adopting positive environmental behaviors at the stadium and at home. Still, as Barrett *et al.* (2019) and McCullough *et al.* (2020b) observed, this promotion often occurs unobtrusively and with little fanfare through website features and environmental reports targeted toward fans specifically seeking this content (e.g., fans with existing knowledge of and interest in sustainability; Trail and McCullough, 2020).

When evaluating whether to engage in a public sustainability campaign, most sport organizations embrace one of two approaches: (1) rudimentary messaging that focuses on increasing fan awareness or (2) complete avoidance out of concern over potential "backlash

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from perceived “conservative” or “anti-environmental” fan segments” (Casper *et al.*, 2020, p. 357). In either case, a club’s decision may be informed – in whole or in part – by preconceived assumptions about its fans’ receptiveness to a proenvironmental messaging campaign. Yet, it is unclear how fan attitudes toward a club’s social messaging may differ across clubs, regions and even sports. For instance, a recent Nielsen study indicated Major League Soccer (MLS) fans made personal and financial contributions to the Black Lives Matter movement more frequently than those of the National Football League (NFL), suggesting MLS fans may be open to – and indeed, expecting – clubs to actively engage in social issues (Nielsen, 2020). On the other hand, Wakefield (2020) argued “leagues, teams, players, networks and broadcasters that continue to weave in politics risk losing fans who may never come back” (para. 12), especially in the NFL, where 24% of fans were estimated to be “at-risk” (compared to 14% of MLS fans).

The politicization of climate science and environmental protection has given some sport organizations pause when it comes to engaging in proenvironmental messaging, but others have pushed ahead to champion eco-friendly initiatives at their venues. Still, fan attitudes toward these initiatives remain largely unexplored. Based on the lack of previous research on the topic, the purposes of this study were to examine consumer attitudes toward a professional soccer club’s proenvironmental initiatives and to evaluate whether these attitudes mirrored those found in previous research of fans in different sporting contexts. A common refrain among the few researchers who have studied fan engagement and sustainability is that empirical work should be expanded to other contexts and settings (e.g., Daddi *et al.*, 2021; Greenhalgh and Drayer, 2020; Trail and McCullough, 2020). Otherwise, sport organizations are left to approach their sustainability campaigns with timidity or – even worse – not at all.

Literature review

Sport fans’ attitudes toward environmental issues

The global climate crisis is forcing sport organizations and fans to confront the reality that the sport industry is not impervious to the increasing threat of water stress, extreme rainfall, wildfire, sea level rise, heat stress and hurricanes (Orr and Inoue, 2019). Several studies have examined the relationship between sport fans and their attitudes toward environmental issues (and toward sport organizations that produce proenvironmental messaging and promotions). In one of the earliest and most significant studies of fan engagement in environmental sustainability, Casper *et al.* (2014) found that fans attending an intercollegiate American football “green game” (i.e., a game with special messaging and promotions intended to promote awareness of environmental issues) were influenced to adopt sustainable behaviors on game day and in their ordinary lives, a likely result of the same “elements that drive sport fandom in the first place, especially emotional bonds or community engagement” (p. 85). In Casper *et al.*’s (2017) follow-up study of intercollegiate sport fans, 70% of respondents reported “environmental efforts were important or very important in relation to their fandom of the athletics program” (p. 121), indicating many consumers desire organizations to conduct business in an environmentally-friendly manner. Indeed, Kellison and Hong (2015) found that fans were coming to expect new stadiums in their communities to be designed sustainably.

As public knowledge of environmental issues has expanded, so have the goals of some sport organizations engaging in proenvironmental initiatives. No longer content with simply promoting the importance of, for example, recycling and reducing water usage, a number of collegiate and professional sport organizations have endeavored to influence fans’ everyday behavior outside the stadium, where their environmental actions are equally important to their compliance to in-stadium regulations during the few hours they attend a match. In an investigation of the SK Wyverns, a professional baseball team in South Korea, Choi (2016) noted that as part of the club’s “Let’s Go Green” campaign, they were able to collect more than

one million signatures from fans vowing to adopt environmentally friendly lifestyles. Fans' environmental commitments could be explained in part by [Inoue and Kent \(2012\)](#), who found that a team's proenvironmental initiatives positively affected consumers' connection to the team's values. Using an experimental design to test students' attitudes toward a local professional sport's sustainability initiatives, they concluded that "once internalization takes place, consumers are likely to show their intentions to support the team's environmental initiative and formulate their intentions to perform daily proenvironmental behavior" (p. 428).

In more recent research, scholars have studied the process through which sport spectators evaluate an event's sustainability campaign and commit to behavioral change. In one such study, [Trail and McCullough \(2021\)](#) conducted a longitudinal evaluation of their Sport Sustainability Campaign Evaluation Model, a multistage model that explored the relationship between spectators' environmental predispositions, their sustainable behaviors during events and their satisfaction with (1) general communications during the event and (2) the event's sustainability initiatives. Additionally, they tested the extent to which spectators' attitudes toward sustainability, their sustainability advocacy and their behavioral intentions changed following the event. They found that an individual's environmental attitudes before the event influenced their intentions to participate in sustainable behaviors during the event (and those intentions led to actual eco-friendly behaviors during the event). On the other hand, when spectators reported a lack of information about how to recycle and how to reduce energy and water consumption while at the event, as well as how to utilize public transportation to and from the event, they were less likely to act sustainably during the event. Based on these results, sport organizations seeking to promote proenvironmental behavior change among fans must recognize the importance of communication during events while conceding that some fans will be more receptive to proenvironmental messaging based on their predisposed attitudes toward environmental issues.

Based on previous research, sustainability campaigns that specifically targeted environmentally conscious fans would be ideal, but in practice, sport organizations lack the capacity to do so during events (as nearly all communications occur via a stadium's public address system, video and ribbon boards and program handouts). That reason could explain why some teams are averse to robust sustainability campaigns and why others constrain the promotion of their initiatives to website sections or social media posts. Still, without an adequate understanding of their fans' attitudes toward environmental issues, sport organizations may presume that fans would ignore a sustainability campaign or reject it (and the team) altogether. As discussed in this section, previous research has focused on sport organizations' efforts to promote proenvironmental messaging and elicit positive behavior change. In the context of environmental politics, in a previous study, we identified several common themes among highly identified American football fans based on their identification as environmentalists (or non-environmentalists; [Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020](#)). We argued that clubs could promote superordinate social identities, thereby providing "a path for sport organizations to promote climate action to their whole fanbases" (p. 20). In acknowledgment of the possibility that fan attitudes could differ by sport (among many other factors), researchers were also advised to extend the study to other sporting contexts. In the following section, we discuss these potential dissimilarities further.

Attitudinal differences between sporting clusters

After 25 seasons, MLS has established itself as a league growing in popularity and currently ranks third in the North American league system in total attendance ([Ruthven, 2020](#)). The league has added seven expansion teams in the past five years, with plans for two more in the coming years. Meanwhile, the NFL is consistently the most popular sport in attendance and media viewership in the United States. Both fan bases are passionate and have distinct attributes when compared to each other as well as North America's other professional sport leagues.

There are 15 cities that host both MLS and NFL teams. At times, the two leagues command similar attendances; for example, MLS Cup 2018 and Super Bowl LIII were both held in Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta within a few months of each other. More than 73,000 fans attended the soccer final, while 70,000 were on hand for the football championship (Glass, 2019). Early research by Jewell and Molina (2005) found “a strong indication that American football and soccer may be substitutes in entertainment consumption” (p. 168), while more recently, Bradbury (2020) determined MLS teams do not “compete with or complement” (p. 61) their cities’ other sport teams when it comes to attendance. Although there is evidence of some overlap in MLS and NFL fans, an analysis of more than 400,000 U.S. adults by Morning Consult Brand Intelligence indicated that while 88% of MLS fans reported they were also fans of the NFL, only 30% of NFL fans stated they were also fans of MLS, suggesting there are distinctions in the fan bases that should be explored (Silverman, 2020).

Market demographics of MLS fans differ from fans of other US-based sport leagues, including the NFL. They are younger and more diverse than NFL fans. In fact, MLS fans are the youngest across five major North American professional sports leagues (including MLS, the NFL, Major League Baseball, the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League), as millennials aged 18–34 are the primary market. More than 59% of MLS fans are under 45 years old, and because of their age, they tend to exhibit traditional millennial spending behaviors and habits (Silverman, 2020; Stone, 2019). Television viewership for MLS is not as strong as other leagues, and the league lags in media rights due to lesser demand. In 2017, the average age of MLS’s television audience was 40 years old, whereas the NFL audience was 50 (Lombardo and Broughton, 2017). MLS fans are more likely than fans of any of the four aforementioned professional leagues to stream content (Stone, 2019). In a recent interview with Ruthven (2020), Angela Alfano, MLS Senior Director of Corporate Communications, acknowledged a significant consideration in MLS’s programming strategy was tailoring content to meet the preferences of its relatively young fan base: “With the youngest audience in professional sports, we are uniquely positioned to deliver content in an ‘always on’ or ‘anywhere, anytime’ environment” (para. 5).

Another distinction of MLS fans is their urban lifestyle. From a league perspective, MLS leadership is focused on developing the sport and maintaining teams and their stadiums within cities rather than suburbs because that is where their fans live and work (Ruthven, 2019). This approach mimics European clubs, where teams are community-based and walking to games is more common. For MLS, the concentration of each team’s fan base impacts where it is situated in the city, with the last five new soccer-specific stadiums being built near urban centers (e.g. FC Cincinnati’s TQL Stadium and the Columbus Crew’s Lower.com Field). This strategy is counter to the NFL, whose teams typically utilize large stadiums surrounded by massive parking lots situated in areas further from the central city (Center for Sport and Urban Policy, 2021). As noted by Bruce Miller, Senior Principal and Managing Director at stadium design firm Populous, “[The MLS] fanbase in this country is very young, educated and likes to live in urban area, so the league is really encouraging teams to build in areas that have 365, 24/7 environments” (as quoted in Ruthven, 2019, p. 7). The urban fan base is also more reliant on city amenities, including public transit.

There is some evidence to suggest MLS fans are more responsive to club-led sustainability initiatives. Balley *et al.* (2019) reported millennials are more engaged with global warming than older generations, and there are clear generational differences among members of the Republican Party. For instance, millennial Republicans are more likely to believe global warming is human-caused than Republicans from older generations. Additionally, millennials are generally more likely to consider global warming a personally important issue, more willing to contact government officials about global warming and more willing to donate money to or volunteer for an organization working on global warming.

In the absence of direct, empirically grounded comparisons of league fan bases, sport organizations can only make presumptions about their fans' knowledge of, interest in, and willingness to engage in environmental causes. As McCullough *et al.* (2020a) wrote, "Public engagement (or, in the sport industry, fan engagement and sport communication) can be considered the next frontier of sustainability work" (p. 514). But, as the authors argued, a club's proenvironmental efforts could be muddled by concerns that fans would view them as tendentious, overcomplicated, or unnecessarily worrying. To better understand the extent to which this apprehension is justified, in this study, we examined fan attitudes toward a professional soccer club's proenvironmental initiatives and compared these attitudes to those of fans of a separate sport. Specifically, our study was guided by two research questions:

RQ1. What are fans' attitudes toward an MLS club's proenvironmental initiatives?

RQ2. To what extent do these attitudes compare with those of consumers in the NFL (as defined in Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020)?

We detail the study in the following section.

Method

To assess the consumer response to a professional soccer organization's environmental sustainability actions and messaging (ESAM) campaign, we collaborated with an MLS club to develop a survey. As part of the survey's design, we included space for respondents to provide open-ended comments "related to the [team's] environmental initiatives or environmental issues more generally," and their statements served as the basis for this study. After our university's Institutional Review Board approved the study's research protocol, the club distributed the survey electronically to a season ticket holder distribution list they managed. Completed surveys were reviewed for completeness, and the relevant empirical material was stored and analyzed in NVivo.

To identify common and contrasting themes in the empirical material, template analysis was used. As Brooks *et al.* (2015) noted, a feature of template analysis is "its use of *a priori* themes, allowing researchers to define some themes in advance of the analysis process," particularly when "developing ideas in linked pieces of research" (p. 218). We applied a top-down approach to generate a list of codes (i.e. the template) representing themes identified *a priori* (King, 2012; King *et al.*, 2018); in this case, our previous analysis of NFL fans was used as the reference material (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020). In this corresponding study, we used a similar methodological approach to examine consumer attitudes toward an NFL team's sustainability program based on fans' environmental dispositions (i.e. self-identified environmentalists vs. non-environmentalists). Twenty-four preliminary codes, eight categories and three themes were interpreted in our previous analysis, and these results provided the template for our evaluation of whether fan attitudes toward an ESAM campaign differed by sport (i.e. soccer vs. American football). We had full access to the reference study's empirical material and codebook.

Analysis of the empirical material was completed following Saldaña's (2016) recommendations for solo coding. The coder conferred with two colleagues – the coauthor and another familiar with the project – for the duration of the coding process, which served to strengthen connections made in the empirical material. Furthermore, to support the credibility of the results, many themes described below are illustrated using low-inference descriptors. Following the guidance of Brooks *et al.* (2015), we organized our initial list of codes into broad categories. Then, those categories were arranged into general themes. The results of the study are presented in the section that follows.

Results and discussion

A total of 1,002 surveys were completed, and 147 contained written comments that were retained and coded for this study. Demographic information collected in the survey indicated most respondents considered themselves fans of the MLS club (i.e. 94% strongly agreed, agreed, or somewhat agreed with the study's Team Identification item). Other demographic characteristics collected from the sample included gender identification (82% men, 18% women), race and ethnicity (72% White [non-Hispanic], 10% White [Hispanic], 3% Black [non-Hispanic] and 15% other), age ($Mdn = 35\text{--}44$), level of education (1% high school diploma or equivalent, 42% bachelor's degree and 39% advanced degree), annual household income ($Mdn = \$100,000\text{--}\$149,000$) and homeowner status (70% own, 29% rent and 2% other). Twenty-nine percent of respondents considered themselves active environmentalists, 41% were passive environmentalists, 29% were not environmentalists and 1% declined to answer. When compared to data provided by the club on its overall fan base, this small subset of respondents was less diverse; older; and had higher levels of education, income and homeowner status.

As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), our analysis resulted in 23 preliminary codes, nine categories and four themes. Three themes – Considering Environmental Action, Business Insights and Impacting the Fan Experience – were all consistent with the NFL reference group. A fourth theme, Public Visibility, focused on the possibility that the club's proenvironmental initiatives could provide a competitive advantage over rival cities and positively influence local programming and behaviors. These themes are discussed in turn below.

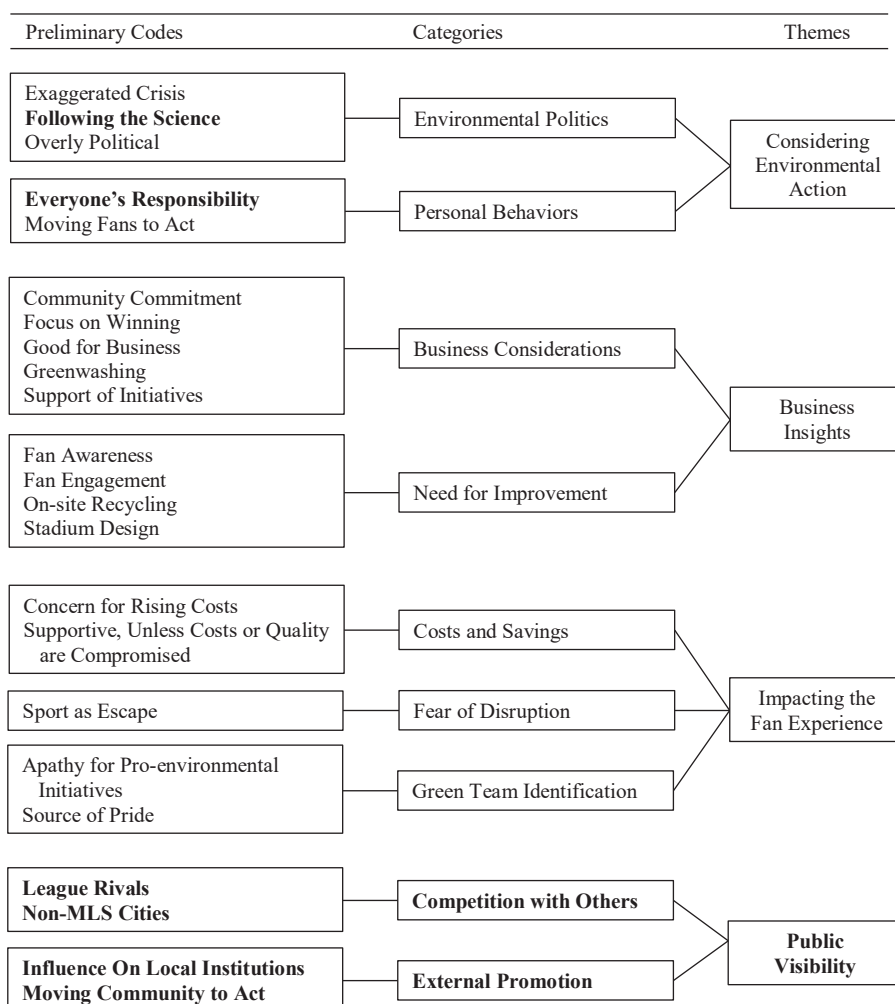
Considering environmental action

In the Considering Environmental Action theme, respondents provided comments related to the broader climate crisis rather than the club's ESAM campaign. As discussed in this section, fan feedback centered around the politics of climate science and their personal environmental behaviors, both of which were consistent with the NFL reference group ([Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020](#)). On the other hand, the one category (of eight) that was not identified in the current study was "Prioritizing the Environment," in which some NFL fans argued "the environment should be the team's top priority, even over on-field performance" ([Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020](#), p. 12).

Environmental politics. Illustrating the scientific skepticism that continues to hamper widespread climate action, some fans expressed doubt toward anthropogenic climate change, using terms like "overhyped" and "overblown" to describe environmental issues. Moreover, multiple respondents implied that organizations that engaged in proenvironmental initiatives were exploiting the so-called "exaggerated crisis" for financial gain, noting "the environmental friendly tag is just a marketing scheme" or "money making scare tactics."

Similarly, some fans showed concern that the club was inserting itself into what they considered a political issue. As a result, they warned the club to "stay out of the political arena" and "don't be political." While some fans were relatively neutral in their responses, others signaled frustration with the club: "I'm really a bit tired of what I consider a political issue becoming a sporting issue." In general, respondents who framed the environment as a political issue thought the club was risking alienating a significant portion of its fans. For example, in the following quotation, a season ticket holder acknowledged the possibility that while many fans might support the club's proenvironmental initiatives, others could lose interest in the team: "I know soccer skews left on the political scale among fans, but if you only cater to them, you risk losing the right-leaning fans like myself that purchased season tickets to support a soccer team, not a political agenda."

A new code, Following the Science, was established in the MLS sample, and it serves as a counterpoint to the aforementioned codes in the Environmental Politics theme. Like those in the previous codes, fans who advised the club to "follow the science" recognized the presence



Note(s): Bold text indicates preliminary codes, categories, and themes independently established from this study as compared to our previous examination of National Football League fans (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020)

Figure 1.
Results of empirical
material coding

of “the other side” (e.g. environmentalists vs. non-environmentalists). But, in this case, some fans counseled the team to ignore those who opposed environmental messaging:

You’re appealing to people on both sides of this “argument,” which is a bit silly. Essentially the entire scientific community has agreed on this. Anyone who goes against this or refuses to believe is either a dummy or an asshole. Please stop pandering to them.

Using similarly hostile language, a second respondent recommended the club do even more to promote its environmental program despite possible resistance: “I understand that it’s tough to deal with troglodytes in the [region] when it comes to environmental issues, but please make your initiatives more well known.”

Within this single category, there are stark differences in fans' attitudes toward environmental issues, and this range of opinions provides some evidence that organizations may be justified in their fear an ESAM campaign could be viewed as a political act by a portion of their consumers (Casper *et al.*, 2021). Still, given that the fan base in this sample is highly identified with the MLS club, it is difficult to predict the extent to which engaging in an ESAM campaign (or alternatively, avoiding proenvironmental programming) would affect consumers' decisions to attend matches, purchase merchandise and follow the club on social media. We revisit this question in later sections.

Personal behaviors. The second category in this theme, Personal Behaviors, focused on the importance (or unimportance) of personal environmental behaviors. Numerous respondents indicated that environmental stewardship was a universal responsibility and that "everyone should do their part." Unlike in the previous category, however, taking environmental action was not an inherently partisan act, as expressed by this fan: "I am a believer in taking care of the environment . . . but I'm not someone who has a politically passionate position about global warming. I just believe that we need to do our best to take care of our planet."

In light of this perceived responsibility, several respondents suggested that the club's stadium design actively and positively influenced their environmental actions. For example, one fan stated, "The biggest environmental change I am trying to make in my lifestyle is using alternative transportation. The [stadium] being on a [public transportation] line will be huge in this effort." A second fan pointed to both the stadium and the club's deployment of an environment-based survey as motives to behave more environmentally friendly: "I am aware of the progressive methods and design of the . . . stadium and have spoken about this often. . . . Good topic for a survey—challenges me to take more action." This insight demonstrates that fans' personal proenvironmental behaviors may be influenced by direct exposure to an ESAM campaign and complemented by attending matches in a sustainably designed stadium (Trail and McCullough, 2021; Wu *et al.*, 2013).

Business insights

The second theme, Business Insights, represents a shift in focus from general environmental attitudes to detailed comments about the club's sustainability initiatives. Specifically, respondents discussed whether the club's attention on ecological issues cohered with the club's broader mission – namely, on-field success. All categories and codes in the Business Insights theme were also present in the NFL reference group (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020).

Business considerations. The Business Considerations category contained a mix of favorable and unfavorable attitudes. For instance, while several fans applauded the club's existing in-stadium initiatives, they encouraged the team to extend its reach to the broader community. To illustrate:

Just because the stadium is eco-friendly doesn't mean the team is. I [would] much rather see the team out planting trees, greening and beautifying the [city] that supports them. It will give them a chance to meet their city as well. Be environmentally conscious proactively, not passively via the stadium's efforts.

Other suggestions to demonstrate the club's community commitment included investing in an environmental education endowment, restoring natural areas around the stadium and establishing a new eco-friendly park.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, numerous fans emphasized the club's obligation to focus on winning matches and MLS Cups. Of course, some of these comments came from respondents who were cynical about environmental issues in the first place. Yet, other fans acknowledged the existence of environmental problems but nevertheless focused on team performance, as illustrated in this selection of quotations: "I do appreciate [the club's] initiative in being environmentally friendly, but I think more focus should be spent on the team"; "I think that

we should be more concerned with [goals] than the environment. I do take care [of] the environment, but it is not my main concern”; and “I am supportive [of] the team being a good representative for the city and contributing to the local community, but at the end of the day, remember the goal is to win matches and field a competitive team.” Still others were apathetic toward any issue outside of on-field success:

I don't care if a player is vegan, paleo, LGBT, an American or international. I don't care if they drive a hybrid vehicle or a gas guzzler. I don't care if they recycle or compost. I don't care what their political views are and don't want to know. Outside of mortal sins, who cares what they do off the field? I pay for tickets to see a winning team on the field. Sponsors should be on board because they want to be associated with a winner.

These examples underscore the possibility that any off-the-field initiatives championed by the team could be deemed by fans (regardless of environmentalist status) irrelevant – or even worse, a distraction – if they were not successful on the field. This perspective is consistent with the team identification literature, which has largely shown that identified fans have a significant interest in the team's on-field performance (see [Lock and Heere, 2017](#)).

Some respondents had a different view of the effect a club's ESAM campaign could have on its on-field performance. For instance, one respondent argued that “the more environmentally friendly the club is, the more people will want to come to the games,” snowballing from greater ticket sales to higher revenues to added investment in the club to more wins. Another supporter stated that fan convenience, club quality and attention on environmental issues were “not mutually exclusive,” and there was “no need to sacrifice” any one in pursuit of the others.

More than any other business consideration, respondents voiced their support for the club's ESAM campaign. Many comments praised the team for its sustainability strategy (e.g. “I think it is wonderful for the team and the city!”, “Thanks for doing your part!!!”; I appreciate [the club] taking proactive steps in being conscious of the environment”), but some went as far to imply using renewable energy and decreasing waste were as important as team performance (e.g. “My friends and I do not want to enjoy soccer at the environment's expense”). In some ways, this fan's expression of guilt resembles consumers studied by [Bösehans et al. \(2020\)](#). They investigated environmentally concerned travelers' experiences when choosing flights and found travelers' feelings of guilt were not reduced by integrated carbon offsets (which serves to “bridge the commonly observed attitude–behavior gap, as the decision to pay the offset is no longer placed on consumers” [p. 2], as opposed to voluntary carbon offsets). Thus, although the fan in our study implied that the club's ESAM campaign might reduce their guilt, it is unclear whether other like-minded consumers would find similar relief from a team's proenvironmental initiatives.

Need for improvement. Recognizing the potential value of the club's ESAM campaign, the Need for Improvement category received extensive attention. Most notably, fans highlighted the club's need to promote its programs more. “I was not aware . . .” was a typical response among fans that expressed having little knowledge of the team's proenvironmental initiatives before receiving the survey used in this study. A number of fans recommended that the club promote its environmentally friendly programs to both fans and the community. As one fan argued, an ESAM campaign could strengthen like-minded fans' connections with the team: “I honestly did not know [the organization] was so environmentally conscious but this does make me an even deeper fan since now we also have a moral ground to stand on.”

Other recommendations for improvement focused on better engaging fans (e.g. “If those initiatives were shared more with the crowd, more people would participate in environmentally sustainable activities while at the stadium”), incentivizing participation (e.g. “It'd be nice to promote those who do show environmental tendencies at the matches either with a shirt or something”), highlighting the stadium's environmental performance

during matches (e.g. “It would be cool to see some environmental metrics . . . “live stats” . . . [for] generating solar power and recycling”) and improving onsite recycling (e.g. “You make it too hard to recycle at matches”).

These suggestions provide the club with practical ways to improve its ESAM campaign, and more broadly, they illustrate the investment some fans have in supporting the club’s off-field initiatives.

Impacting the fan experience

In the third theme, Impacting the Fan Experience, respondents considered whether they would be forced to pay a premium or have their spectator experience interrupted by the club’s ESAM campaign. Additionally, they discussed the impact the initiatives had on their fandom of the club. These responses very closely resembled those of the NFL reference group (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020) both in content and in tone, as discussed further in this section.

Costs and savings. The perceived cost associated with adopting sustainability behaviors is not a new concern (e.g. Trendafilova *et al.*, 2014), and some fans in this study suspected these costs would be passed down to consumers. For instance, one season ticket holder argued, “There is always a tradeoff between “being green” and the expense to “keep it green.”” Another pointed to high food and beverage costs, noting they made it “difficult to think about paying higher prices for an environmental initiative.” Other fans expressed conditional support for the club’s sustainability efforts, as long as they were “cost appropriate” and did not “degrade the experience to the end-user,” “add costs to the end-user,” or “detract from the primary mission of being a top-level team.” These statements are at odds with previous research showing consumers are aware of and willing to pay a “green premium,” the added cost of an eco-friendly product (Guyader *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, these results diverge from one of the few studies of sport fans’ willingness to pay for environmental initiatives. Greenhalgh and Drayer (2020) found an NFL team’s fans reported a willingness to pay on average US\$6.50 to support the team’s environmental initiatives. Several reasons may explain our contradictory finding, including the possibility that the MLS club’s fans in the current study are less willing to pay for a club’s ESAM strategy, or more likely the case, the fans captured in this category represent a small group of the club’s overall fan base.

Fear of disruption. Some fans were less supportive of the club’s proenvironmental campaign, and they specifically questioned the club’s efforts to promote its sustainability initiatives. These respondents indicated it was possible – and even acceptable – to behave sustainably without engaging in “stupid political solutions and political rhetoric.” For these club supporters, there was a worry that the organization could go too far in its promotion of what they deemed to be a “political cause” by becoming “preachy” or giving “political or religious lectures.” This concern is illustrated effectively in the following comment:

If the club wish[es] to be good stewards of the environment, so be it. Conversely, let’s not get ridiculous. We pay our money to watch football and escape the day-to-day for a bit, not to be lectured on whether or not the sky is falling. Put out the [waste receptacles]; I’ll fill them appropriately. It’s the civil thing to do.

For some sport organizations, this characterization of an ESAM campaign may exacerbate their existing resistance to engage in proenvironmental strategies. While acknowledging that some fans associate eco-friendly initiatives with inconvenience, it is worth noting that environmentally sustainable actions tend to be taken behind the scenes. For instance, in the context of eco-friendly stadiums, Kellison and McCullough (2018) observed, “Once thought of as costly and disruptive measures to satisfy a niche market, sustainable design is now more accurately understood as a system that increases efficiency while complementing the spectator experience” (p. 13). Thus, organizations committed to environmental stewardship but wary of potential repercussions from a segment of their supporters may choose to focus

on actions while making little effort to announce or promote their activities. But, as contended in the remaining discussion, another segment of supporters may continue to pressure the club to conduct messaging campaigns that publicize their sustainability initiatives.

Green team identification. A second group of respondents explained how the club's environmental agenda contributed to fan affinity, and their comments revealed the possible range of outcomes that could result from an ESAM campaign. On one extreme, a fan warned the club that if it became "more involved in extreme political causes like this, I will stop following the team." In the middle, a more apathetic fan said any proenvironmental initiative was a "good and positive attribute." Still, as the fan continued, "I am not going to gauge my like or support on it." On the other extreme were numerous supporters that expressed pride in the club for its recycling program. Another fan suggested the pride that arose from the club's ESAM campaign could lessen the adverse effects of poor on-field performance: "Even if we don't win games, at least we won't look like assholes using tons of resources—or at least have less of an impact."

Public visibility

The identification of a fourth theme, Public Visibility, marked a contrast from our previous study of NFL fans (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020). In this theme, respondents compared the club's proenvironmental agenda with league rivals and non-MLS cities. Additionally, they conveyed the belief that the team's local popularity and media presence could be used to encourage city leaders to adopt a more robust sustainability plan and inspire environmentally friendly behaviors among residents.

Competition with others. Some respondents drew comparisons with other cities when explaining their support of or opposition to the club's sustainability program. At times, these comparisons focused specifically on cities with other MLS rivals. For instance, one fan that implored the team to "keep out of it" argued, "Politics should not be part of the identity of the team. We're not Portland" (home of the Timbers MLS club). Conversely, another supporter pointed to another MLS city to argue their club could be doing more to support the environment: "The best environmental city when it comes to recycling (in my opinion) is Seattle" (home of the Sounders MLS club), adding that Seattle's recycling program was far superior to their own city's.

Not all comparisons focused on rival MLS cities. Some respondents contrasted their municipal recycling services with other cities in the region, referring local leaders to other places "to see how it should be done." Supporters' comparisons with other MLS and non-MLS cities suggest they believe the environmental strategies of both their club and their city are reflections of their team and local identity, respectively. When fans generally support proenvironmental strategies and observe their local club participating in a sustainability campaign, this congruence may be evidence that their club is superior to its rivals. Conversely, when fans support proenvironmental strategies in general but fail to observe their own club engaging in an ESAM campaign, this incongruence could lead fans to pressure their club to act in ways that more closely resemble the favorable features of its rivals. Corresponding scenarios exist for fans who generally oppose proenvironmental strategies.

External promotion. Particularly among those that supported their club's ESAM campaign, respondents also considered ways that the club could impact the local community. As one fan recommended, if a club was successful in delivering environment-friendly events, "We should brag more about that kind of winning, too!" According to some respondents, promoting the club's sustainability initiatives "via news coverage, social media, local events, etc." could signal their importance to the city's leadership and institutions: "[The club] should be proud of these and let the city . . . know it's top of mind. Shout the club's environmental initiatives from the rooftops!" Moreover, the club's ESAM campaign could compel policymakers to improve city services like recycling:

There are not enough ways in the [city] for residents who mostly rent to recycle, compost, or have options to do so easily. Not only engaging in making the team environmentally friendly, but driving a community initiative would speak volumes of the . . . organization.

Another supporter echoed this sentiment: “I think [the club] can have [a] major impact [on the city’s] recycling efforts and improve the environmental sustainability of the city and the city’s residents (in addition to all other supporters outside of [the city]).”

Numerous commenters also discussed the club’s potential impact on citizens, noting that becoming “more vocal about its environmental awareness and accomplishments” could result in “more press/engagement.” In a city that could benefit from increased environmental leadership (as evidenced by fans’ complaints about the city’s poor recycling services), the club could arise from a “solid position of influence in a city that’s a mixed bag on being environmentally friendly.” This line of discussion illustrates the potential of highly visible sport organizations to promote positive behavior change not just among their consumers but also those in the general public, who might learn of a club’s ESAM through the club’s (and media’s) broad, external promotion (Kellison *et al.*, 2015).

Concluding remarks

In this study, we analyzed highly identified fans’ attitudes toward an MLS club’s proenvironmental campaign. As part of our analysis, we examined the extent to which their attitudes differed from an NFL team’s fans. Without a firm research foundation to support major sport organizations’ and leagues’ decisions, they must often rely on conjecture, limited data, trial and error and luck. The results of this study represent an initial exploration of whether sport fans differ across sporting contexts. Consistent with NFL fans (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020), MLS supporters in this study expressed a wide range of attitudes toward climate change and environmental sustainability. Although intraleague differences were most apparent in the Considering Environmental Action theme (which focused on environmental issues in general), these distinctions were also present throughout the other themes. Like their NFL counterparts, MLS fans also shared a variety of recommendations to improve their club both on the field and on its financial bottom line. This finding should come as no surprise, as highly identified fans are expected to take an interest not just in the team’s performance but also in the general management and operations of the organization.

While some themes related to fans’ attitudes toward proenvironmental messaging were consistent across sporting leagues, differences also emerged, and they provide meaningful implications for practitioners. Specifically, numerous MLS fans in this study stated their team’s proenvironmental messaging could lead to positive benefits outside the stadium, both locally and otherwise. Respondents argued that the club’s ESAM campaign (or lack thereof) had consequences outside of the stadium, a belief informed by the club’s popularity in the local media and community. Regarding competition with rivals, MLS is a young league compared to the NFL (and many other major professional sporting leagues); in the absence of a long history between teams, fans may look to other factors (such as their club’s engagement in ESAM and community involvement) when generating comparisons with rival clubs (Cobbs and Tyler, 2018). Similar strategies may be employed by upstart sport leagues and federations seeking to fast-track the formation of rivalries between clubs. Furthermore, MLS organizations may use their platform to increase awareness, influence personal behaviors and effect systemic, societal changes (Agyemang *et al.*, 2020).

We acknowledge several limitations in the study. First, participants in this study represented highly identified MLS fans, and this subset of consumers likely differs from those who attend matches less frequently and have weaker psychological connections with the club. It is unclear whether highly identified fans are likely to have greater awareness or support of a club’s off-field initiatives than more casual fans. Alternatively, because of their

high levels of identity, they may be more apathetic toward non-performance-related initiatives like an ESAM campaign. In future research, scholars may consider examining consumers with lower levels of team identification.

Furthermore, in this study, we collected empirical material at a single point in time. Although previous research has shown attitudes toward nature and environmental protection to be stable over time (Kaiser *et al.*, 2014), follow-up studies may consider contextual influences like the club's on-field performance and the maturity of its ESAM campaign. Additionally, longitudinal studies – either quantitative or qualitative – may provide additional insights into how environmental attitudes differ within an otherwise apparently homogenous fan base.

The results of this study suggest some qualitative distinctiveness between fans of two different sports, and as discussed previously, MLS clubs and other, less established leagues may follow several prescriptions in response to the unique attitudes expressed by their fans. Still, in future work, researchers may consider whether common threads between ostensibly different groups (e.g., NFL and MLS fans) can be aggregated to establish a broader profile of environmentally conscious fans across sport. This scholarly exercise may have immediate practical implications by providing organizations with a lodestar to advance their ESAM campaigns in a direct, but disarming, manner.

Introducing an ESAM campaign in an unobjectionable manner is especially important given this study's findings that the climate crisis is a partisan issue. Expanding on Casper *et al.*'s (2021) study on the relationship between environmental sustainability and political affiliation at the collegiate level, in this study, highly identified fans of a single professional club represented the entire spectrum of political attitudes. That is, some season ticket holders threatened to stop following the club if it continued to engage in an ESAM campaign, while others said displays of proenvironmental stewardship strengthened their connections to the organization and thought it would attract more fans. The split in opinion can be seen in other leagues' efforts to engage in sustainability. For instance, in 2020, Sport Positive ranked all 20 clubs in the English Premier League using a point system that rewarded various environmental sustainability initiatives, including commitment, communication and education (Poole, 2022). Half of the clubs received full marks in this area; on the other hand, the remaining half failed to receive even partial credit, indicating they had not promoted any sustainability strategy to the public. This stark contrast is likely to continue until a depoliticization of the climate crisis occurs, or lagging clubs are persuaded to change their behaviors for other reasons. Given the unlikelihood of the former in the immediate future, sport organizations are encouraged to consider strategies that enhance their ESAM campaigns in ways that limit discord among their fans. For instance, organizations "may use fan affinity to cultivate a superordinate social identity that connects otherwise distinct segments" (Kellison and Cianfrone, 2020, p. 20). By focusing on shared interests among otherwise disparate groups, the organization may maintain its ESAM commitment without having to choose between the environment and its most skeptical supporters.

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