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Environmental Sustainability in football clubs' strategy – The perception of Sporting Clube de Portugal's fans

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Master in Business Administration

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BUSINESS
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To my Grandfather Carlos.

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Resumo

O mundo está em emergência climática, tornando a sustentabilidade ambiental e a responsabilidade social corporativa relevantes em todos os setores. Coerentemente, os clubes de futebol têm vindo lentamente a introduzir na sua estratégia organizacional iniciativas para reduzir o impacto negativo que o sector tem no ambiente. Devido à sua enorme visibilidade, estes esforços podem não só ter um impacto positivo no ambiente, mas também inspirar a comunidade. Neste estudo foram realizadas entrevistas assíncronas a uma amostra de 95 adeptos do Sporting Clube de Portugal, com o objetivo de analisar (1) o seu nível de sensibilização para a sustentabilidade ambiental, (2) a eficácia da comunicação do Sporting sobre a introdução desta temática na sua estratégia, e (3) a forma como os adeptos percebem e (4) são impactados por esses esforços. Os resultados mostram que os adeptos acreditam que a sustentabilidade ambiental é relevante no setor do futebol, mas que a maioria desconhece as medidas que estão a ser implementadas pelo clube. Considerando ainda que estas medidas devem focar-se em áreas como os transportes, a eficiência energética, o estádio e os eventos desportivos. Deste modo, os resultados evidenciaram a necessidade de uma melhor estratégia de comunicação das medidas de sustentabilidade ambiental que estão a ser implementadas pelo clube, o que poderá trazer vantagem competitiva ao Sporting e criar um impacto positivo nos seus adeptos.

Palavras-chave:

Estratégia organizacional; Sustentabilidade ambiental; Responsabilidade social corporativa; Clubes de futebol; Adeptos de futebol; Sporting Clube de Portugal

Classificação JEL:

Q01 – Sustainable Development

Q56 – Environment and Development; Environment and Trade; Sustainability; Environmental Accounts and Accounting; Environmental Equity; Population Growth

Abstract

The world is in a climate emergency, which makes environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility relevant in all sectors. Football clubs have been slowly introducing initiatives in their organizational strategy to reduce the negative impact the sector has on the environment. Due to their huge visibility, these efforts can not only have a positive impact in the environment, but also inspire the community. Asynchronous interviews were conducted to a sample of 102 Sporting supporters, aiming at analyzing the level of awareness of Sporting fans to environmental sustainability, the effectiveness of Sporting's communication about introducing this thematic in its strategy and how the supporters perceive and are impacted by those efforts. The results show that the supporters believe environmental sustainability is relevant in the football sector, but most are unaware of measures being implemented by the club, considering initiatives should tackle transportation, energy efficiency, the stadium and the sports events. This highlighted the need for a better communication strategy of the efforts being put in place by the club, which could bring competitive advantage to Sporting and create a positive impact on its fans.

Keywords:

Organizational strategy; Environment sustainability; Corporate social responsibility; Football clubs; Football Fans; Sporting Clube de Portugal

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Q01 – Sustainable Development

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Index of Acronyms and Abbreviations

ES – Environmental Sustainability

FIFA – Fédération Internationale de Football Association

N/A – Not applicable

OCSs – Civil Society Organizations

RSC – Corporate Social Responsibility

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

Sporting – Sporting Clube de Portugal

UN – United Nations

1. Introduction

The world is in a climate emergency. The emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere is responsible for the increase in the planet's global temperature and threatens life as we know it. Although some countries have reduced the emission of greenhouse gases, data published in the *Climate Action Note* of the United Nations (UN) reveals that there are countries that have increased emissions, compared to 1990. It is therefore urgent that global measures are taken to reduce the emission of these gases into the atmosphere and that there is a joint effort of all nations to combat climate change (*UNEP Climate Action Note | Data You Need to Know*, undated). This is one of the global great challenges of our society (Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019).

To achieve this goal, in 2015, the Paris Agreement was signed by 196 countries, aiming to limit global warming to less than 2°C, when compared to pre-industrial levels (*The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC*, undated). In the same year, at the United Nations summit, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was created, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to achieve them (*Agenda 2030 - Global Compact*, undated; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Aiming to list the actions that must be taken for the sake of the people and the planet, the SDGs outline the path to success in the fight against climate change. About the SDGs, the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said that they “are our common vision for humanity and a social contract between world’s leaders and the people” (*Agenda 2030 - Global Compact*, undated).

In recent years, the topics of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability, particularly in its environmental aspect, have been the subject of numerous studies, in different sectors of activity (Algarni et al., 2022; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Peters & Simaens, 2020). This trend might be justified by a mentality change in companies, characterized by a greater awareness of environmental protection issues and the adoption of organizational strategies focusing on the social and environmental aspects of sustainability, and not only based on economic return (Algarni et al., 2022; González-Serrano et al., 2020; Lobillo Mora et al., 2021). The factors that lead companies to adopt a strategy associated with environmental sustainability (ES) are described in the literature, from which the creation of competitive advantage and the improvement of the organization's reputation can be highlighted (Engert et al., 2016; González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lobillo Mora et al., 2021).

Regarding the study of ES in particular, Lozano & Barreiro-Gen (2022) emphasized the scarcity of research on civil society organizations (CSOs). From these, they highlighted sports

organizations, which include football clubs, that have been slowly adopting sustainable measures. This fact is reinforced by numerous authors, who stress that, although CSR has been increasingly taken into account by sports organizations and as such studied by the Academia, there is still a need to investigate this topic especially with regards to the environmental aspect of CSR (González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lobillo Mora et al., 2021; Mascarenhas et al., 2021; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Moreover, the importance of sport for sustainable development has been reinforced by the inclusion of sport in the SDGs (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Millington et al., 2022). In addition to acknowledge sport as an enabler of sustainable development, the UN considers that this sector has the ability to promote a more sustainable lifestyle and environmental protection, namely through the education of children and young adults (Millington et al., 2022).

In order to fill this knowledge gap in the literature, the main goal of this dissertation is to promote knowledge on ES in the strategy of sports organizations, in particular of football clubs. The relevance of this thematic can be based on two factors. The first factor is the negative impact that football clubs have on the environment and their efforts to improve in this aspect, introducing sustainable initiatives in their organizational strategy (Bunds et al., 2019; GonzálezGonzález-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). The second factor relates to the influence that football clubs can have on society and the enormous reach they have, whether through major sporting events, their sponsors, or their fans (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). As a matter of fact, football is the most popular sport in the world and, consequently, football clubs have a huge visibility (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). In particular, the relationship of football clubs with their fans and the ability of the latter to be inspired by the clubs' sustainable practices has been studied by several authors and is also the focus of this dissertation (González-Serrano et al., 2020; Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022; Lobillo Mora et al., 2021; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022).

From the literature, the article by Lobillo Mora et al. (2021) can be highlighted. The authors studied the case of Real Betis Balompié club and its rebranding process with a strategy based on the pillars of sustainability, analyzing the internal and external perceptions to this change in the club by conducting interviews with members of the club management and questionnaires to fans. By describing an exemplary situation of how a football club can integrate sustainability measures into its organizational strategy, the study of Mora and colleagues also positively influenced the choice of this dissertation's topic.

This dissertation will, therefore, focus on the study of ES in the professional football sector in Portugal and in one club in particular – Sporting Clube de Portugal (Sporting) –, analyzing the level of awareness of Sporting fans to the topic of ES, how they perceive the club’s efforts to introduce these thematic in its strategy and how they are impacted by those efforts. The decision to study the Portuguese football sector was rooted on the fact that it is the country where this dissertation was carried out and that no articles describing a similar study in this context were found in the literature. Furthermore, the decision to choose Sporting as a case study was based on it being one of the clubs in Portugal with the highest visibility in professional football and, as such, has a considerable number of fans and club members. Additionally, the club has announced in its official website a group of initiatives which demonstrates its commitment to this issue, as part of a new sustainability report planned to be published by the end of 2022/2023 season (*Comunicado Sporting Clube de Portugal* / *Sporting Clube de Portugal*, undated).

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. After the introduction, chapter 2 – the literature review – develops the concepts of sustainability and CSR, both in general and more interconnected with the football sector. This chapter also briefly discusses the history of Sporting and the context in which the club is inserted. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this dissertation, including the research problem, the research questions, and the general and specific objectives. The analysis of the data obtained is described in chapter 4 and the results are discussed in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 describes the conclusions and limitations of the study and makes suggestions for future studies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sustainability

2.1.1. Recent history of the pro-environment movement

Even though the pro-environment movement began several decades ago, one of the world's biggest challenges remains mitigating the impacts of climate change (Francis et al., 2017; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). The most recent wave of this movement is considered to have started in the 1970s, triggered by the increasing imbalance between economic growth and environmental conservation (Hugaerts et al., 2021). In 1972, the UN organized the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021). Although it did not give rise to concrete actions, this first effort to discuss, on a global level, the issues of sustainability and sustainable development, stimulated the formation of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1983, led by former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland. This commission's aim was to understand the environmental problems faced by the planet, identify their causes, and develop an international strategy to mitigate them in the long term (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021). Their course of action was, thus, rooted on the premise that sustainability must be based on the analysis of current practices in order to plan for the necessary future changes (Francis et al., 2017).

In this sense, in 1987 the report *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland Report, outlined a global action strategy, proposing measures to achieve sustainable development by the end of the 20th century (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021). In this report, sustainable development was defined as development that allows current needs to be met while not compromising the needs of future generations (Hugaerts et al., 2021). The World Commission on Environment and Development was also the first to emphasize the importance of the three aspects of sustainability – economic, social and environmental –, still considered essential today to the balance needed for sustainable development (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021). These three pillars have been the basis for the work of many authors over the years, such as that of Elkington who developed the Triple Bottom Line framework (Hugaerts et al., 2021). This framework emphasizes the importance of complementarity between the three aforementioned

facets and continues to be widely used today. It was even the basis for the creation of the SDGs by the UN in 2015 (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021).

As mentioned previously, the year of 2015 was an important moment for the pro-environment movement (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). In that year, with the goal of limiting global warming to less than 2°C when compared to pre-industrial levels, the Paris Agreement was signed by 196 countries (*The Paris Agreement / UNFCCC*, undated). In the same year, the UN organized an international summit that led to the creation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the 17 SDGs and 169 targets set to achieve them (*Agenda 2030 - Global Compact*, undated; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). The SDGs, as discussed, correspond to a global vision of the actions that must be taken into account for the benefit of the people and the planet and outline the path to success in the fight against climate change (*Agenda 2030 - Global Compact*, undated; Francis et al., 2017).

2.1.2. Sport and sustainability

Over the years, other documents with focus on sustainable development have emerged, such as the UN Climate Action Framework for Sport, in 2017 (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Mascarenhas et al., 2021). This framework highlights sport as an essential agent in sustainable development. This idea was reinforced by the recognition of the important role of sport in achieving the SDGs and in promoting awareness for this theme (González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Millington et al., 2022).

One of the key factors to take into account when promoting sustainability in sport is the negative impact that sports organizations and major sporting events have on the environment (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Pache, 2020; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). From sports in general, football stands out, as it is the most popular sport worldwide with a follower volume of around 3.5 billion (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). In this line, Francis et al. (2017) stressed the importance of all organizations, including football clubs, reducing their impact on the environment. While Pache (2020) criticized the football industry, stating "it is hard to imagine FIFA [Fédération Internationale de Football Association], or any other professional football club, making decisions with collective welfare in mind when the financial risk, is so high for their shareholders" (p. 93). The author argues that limits should be implemented by governments on professional football, in order to prevent the continued unbridled use of resources in the years to come. However, even though the environmental aspect of sustainability is perhaps the least valued in the sports sector, particularly in professional

football, it is evident in the literature that this sector too, following the trend in the business world, has been making an effort to play a more responsible role in environmental protection (Francis et al., 2017; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020).

FIFA's first efforts to address this problem and integrate environmental management principles into the organization of a major sporting event date back to 2006 (Meza Talavera et al., 2019; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). For the football World Cup held that year in Germany, the Green Goal™ program was created (later renamed Football for the Planet™), which was aimed at measuring the ecological footprint of the event, in order to allow an action plan to reduce the ecological footprint of future events (Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). Thus, this program marked the beginning of a long journey in promoting awareness about ES in football and served as an example for the organizing countries of the following European championships – Austria and Switzerland in 2008 – and World Cups – South Africa in 2010 and Brazil in 2014 (Meza Talavera et al., 2019; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). Regardless, the experience of South Africa and Brazil turned out to be very different, in a negative way, from the event held in 2006, which may be related to the conditions of poverty and social inequality experienced in these countries (Meza Talavera et al., 2019). In 2018, a sustainability strategy for the World Cup in Russia was developed, with the involvement of various stakeholders. However, the impact of this event remained to be evaluated at the date of writing this dissertation, as was the impact of the Qatar World Cup, held in December 2022, which had not been considered promising at all prior to the event realization (Ermolaeva & Lind, 2021; Meza Talavera et al., 2019). Therefore, even though major sporting events have the potential to act as promoters of sustainable development in general, and ES in particular, it is not difficult to see that the sector is facing a huge challenge and that there is still a long way to go (Meza Talavera et al., 2019).

FIFA's efforts to promote the beginning of a change in mentality happened not only at the level of major sporting events, but also at the level of national football championships and, consequently, the football clubs taking part in them (Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). Some authors highlight that more and more sports organizations are aware of the high cost of their actions for the environment, starting to prioritize the adoption of sustainable practices (Bunds et al., 2019; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). However, Tóffano Pereira et al. (2019) warned about the slow change in the implementation of ES measures in the operations of these organizations, particularly football clubs. In this regard, after studying the actions taken by English Premier League clubs, the authors argued that football clubs' attention to this issue should be strengthened and monitored to ensure that their efforts remain current and relevant. In addition to the certainty that football clubs have the tools to make this change, the authors expressed

concern about the enormous visibility that they have and the fact that an opportunity is being missed for them to act as agents of change and to promote awareness and education of their supporters on this issue. Accordingly, the authors reinforced the importance of football clubs, particularly the English Premier League clubs that were the target of their study, to promote public awareness of ES and the need to reduce football's ecological footprint. Indeed, another study about Premier League football clubs, published in 2020, found that most of the clubs studied did not have information available on their website about ES measures, only four clubs submitted sustainability reports, and only one club included ES initiatives in its annual reports (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). The authors of this study further state that their data coincides with information obtained in another study about English Premier League clubs dating from 2010/2011, which concluded that football clubs impact the environment negatively. They also make reference to a study from 2016/2017, on English and German football clubs, where it was also found that ES measures were not seen as a priority.

From a slightly more positive point of view, Lozano & Barreiro-Gen (2022) highlighted the effort of the English club Manchester City Football Club, through the creation of the Environmental Awareness Program and the publication of annual reports on ES, demonstrating an evolution towards a greater concern with these issues. Additionally, as mentioned before, Lobillo Mora et al. (2021) studied the case of the Real Betis Balompié club, which joined the Forever Green program in 2020, starting a rebranding process with a strategy allied to sustainable development. The authors investigated this rebranding process and analyzed its impact on the fans' perception of the club.

2.2. Corporate Social Responsibility

2.2.1. The importance of corporate social responsibility in organizations

CSR relates to the economic, environmental and social impacts of companies' activities and has been studied in the business world for some time (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2019). Engert et al. (2016) stated that the commitment of companies to the balance between these three aspects requires their integration as part of the company's strategy and its processes. However, the same authors mentioned that, even if this need is recognized by management teams, it is rarely put into practice in the strategic management of companies.

Pedersen & Rosati (2019) described the need for managers to deal with the social and environmental aspects of CSR while considering the economic well-being of the organization.

The authors considered that this balance generates tensions, which the organization must deal with in its daily life. Furthermore, Engert et al. (2016) highlighted that the influence of external stakeholders is one of the factors that is driving companies to adopt CSR strategies. The authors pointed out that stakeholder engagement has a positive impact on companies and can bring them long-term benefits. Indeed, Fifka & Jaeger (2020) emphasized that one of the key points for the definition of the organization's core strategy has to do with the relationship with stakeholders and with the identification of the problems that the company proposes to solve. As a matter of fact, Engert et al. (2016) defined an organization's strategy as the choice of a unique position for the company, adopting a differentiating attitude and responding to an existing market need. That is the path companies follow to achieve the much sought-after competitive advantage over their competitors. In recent years, with an increased awareness of the issues related to the climate crisis and the need to mitigate society's negative impacts on the environment, a greater number of consumers classified as "pro-environmental" have emerged (González-Serrano et al., 2020). Thus, in order to seek competitive advantage, companies constantly promote the improvement of their image and the development of new markets. This phenomenon has led to companies taking greater consideration of aspects related to CSR and, in particular, ES (González-Serrano et al., 2020).

González-Serrano et al. (2020) have even described a new area of study that has emerged in the field of entrepreneurship in the last decade – sustainable entrepreneurship. This concept reflects a shift in business strategy, where economic benefits are intrinsically linked to the creation of environmental and social value. Indeed, data from 2019 highlights the urgency of transforming companies to, among other things, limit their environmental impact. The quick pace with which the need for change arises today and the progressive increase in competitiveness have led companies to focus on sustainable development and to invest in innovation. Sustainable innovation brings benefits to communities and to the planet, by helping to reduce the negative environmental impacts of organizations. Even though pressure from society seems to be one of the main reasons for organizations to adopt sustainable practices, Hugaerts et al. (2021) described other incentives, such as creating competitive advantage, creating new marketing opportunities, or improving the organization's image.

2.2.2. Corporate social responsibility in football

Although the concept of CSR in sports, particularly in professional football, is a recent trend, there are already numerous studies published on this subject (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; González-

Serrano et al., 2020; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2019). It is clear that there is a commercialization of sports in general, and football in particular, with football clubs focusing mainly on the pursuit of profit. However, recently there has been a paradigm shift in this sector, characterized by the prioritization of ethical issues such as CSR and, in particular, ES (González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Pedersen & Rosati, 2019; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020).

Thus, sustainability initiatives are increasingly strategically relevant for sport organizations (González-Serrano et al., 2020). Indeed, Fifka & Jaeger (2020) highlighted the importance of integrating CSR into the organizational strategy of football clubs and proposed a framework for this integration. They emphasized that the strategy must be implemented at the operations level, and it is essential to monitor and evaluate the results of the initiatives and communicate them to stakeholders. In the literature, there is mention of a win-win situation with regards to CSR in sport, since the organization's investment in social and environmental aspects is expected to bring benefits both to the organization itself and to its stakeholders (Pedersen & Rosati, 2019). In fact, several authors emphasize the ability of professional football clubs to create value for their stakeholders, and the benefits this can bring them, such as increased institutional relevance, strategic and financial advantages, increased level of competitiveness, among others. (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021). Of the numerous positive impacts of implementing CSR initiatives, Fifka & Jaeger (2020) highlighted the mobilization of a new generation of supporters or the overcoming of the distance between communities and sports organizations, caused by the phenomenon of commercialization in sport. Additionally, Raimo et al. (2021) argued that the transformation of football into a business excessively focused on making profit and the little attention given to the social and environmental aspects of CSR have led football to face a legitimacy crisis. Since football clubs' stakeholders are increasingly aware of the CSR issue, namely regarding social and environmental aspects, the authors identified the implementation and communication of CSR measures as a tool that could help solve this legitimacy crisis.

Several authors refer to the positive impact that football clubs can have in promoting ES measures, due to the enormous visibility they have and because they are followed by large masses (Hugaerts et al; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Thus, football can be used as a communication tool and has enormous potential to be the starting point for the inclusion of ES programs in sports (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Lozano & Barreiro-Gen (2022) have even suggested that football clubs, like other CSOs, can be agents of social change. However, they consider that it is only possible to convey this message effectively if the

clubs themselves adopt ES measures. Thus, because they have this role in society and to take better advantage of it, the authors emphasize that sports organizations, and in particular football clubs, should be held accountable for their actions, influenced to behave more responsibly, and stimulated to effectively communicate the ES measures they have adopted.

It is, therefore, important that football clubs report on their CSR initiatives in an integrated way (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020). However, Ribeiro et al. (2019) e Kellison & Cianfrone (2022) found that only disclosing information regarding CSR in annual reports is not the best way to communicate with the general public, since these reports are only consulted by a fraction of the target audience, which proactively seeks this type of content, and are not easy to interpret and understand. Several authors consider that, in the countries that were targeted by their studies, there is a need to improve this disclosure, particularly with regards to working conditions, anti-corruption policies, or ES policies (Raimo et al., 2021; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Ribeiro et al., 2019). Additionally, it has been found that football clubs with higher visibility appear to disclose a wider variety of CSR information than their peers (Raimo et al., 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2019).

In the literature, it is suggested that the promotion of CSR-related initiatives and their dissemination, for example through the internet, can have a positive impact on the club's relationship with its stakeholders, in particular with fans (Ribeiro et al., 2019). Additionally, a 2014 study found that it is possible to positively impact fans attending sporting events by communicating messages about ES and promote awareness of this issue during the event (Casper et al., 2014). The study found that fans were influenced to adopt sustainable practices during the event and later in their daily lives (Casper et al., 2014). In a subsequent study, the same author found that most respondents recognized environmental efforts as important or very important and wanted organizations to have a responsible attitude towards the environment (Casper et al., 2017). However, Ráthonyi-Ódor et al. (2020) found that most of the football clubs they studied still did not communicate information related to their ES measures in a thorough manner, often having distant goals in implementing these measures. Due to the scarce information made available by football clubs on this topic, the authors found that it is also difficult to understand to what extent clubs are committed to integrating ES into their organizational strategy.

Thus, several authors suggest that the perception of the different stakeholders to the disclosure of CSR information by football clubs should be further studied, namely to analyze the impact of this practice on the legitimacy problem in the football sector (Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022; Ribeiro et al., 2019). It should also be noted that several authors state that,

although CSR has been increasingly taken into account by sports organizations, and consequently studied by the Academia, there is still a knowledge gap in what regards the environmental aspect of CSR in football, highlighting the need to conduct exploratory studies on this issue (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lobillo Mora et al., 2021; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022; Mascarenhas et al., 2021; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Fifka & Jaeger (2020) e González-Serrano et al. (2020) also suggest analyzing the perspectives and expectations of stakeholders on this topic in professional football. Table 1 presents a summary of the most relevant suggestions for future studies identified in the literature review.

Table 1 – Top 6 of the papers with the most relevant suggestions for future studies about ES in the sports sector.

Author, year	Purpose and main research topics	Future lines of research
Fifka & Jaeger, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They have created a framework for the strategic integration of CSR in European football. • They concluded that there are several factors that lead clubs to adopt CSR strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic integration of CSR in contexts other than the UK. • CSR measures in football. • Environmental component of CSR in football. • Stakeholders' perspectives and expectations regarding the strategic integration of CSR, using the framework created.
González-Serrano et al., 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature review on sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation in sports. • They concluded that even though it is becoming a subarea of the study of entrepreneurship in sports, it is still understudied. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior of so-called green sport consumers. • Celebration of sports events in a sustainable way, at different dimension levels. • Socio-economic impact and fans' perception of holding sporting events in a sustainable way. • Sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation in sport.
Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They looked at how CSOs, in particular football clubs, have approached sustainability. • They concluded that football clubs have been considering various sustainable measures. • They stressed the potential that clubs have to influence society through their fans and be agents of change. • They defined organizational sustainability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of football clubs from different countries. • Level of fans' awareness of sustainability issues, compared to the efforts of their clubs. • Role of supporters in "sustainability transfer". • Football clubs that are leaders in the implementation of sustainable measures.
Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They studied the attitudes of fans towards pro-environmental initiatives of football clubs. • They concluded that fans with a high level of identification with their club are expected to have an interest not only in the team's performance, but 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporters with lower levels of identification with their club. • Influence of the performance on the field and the state of development of the clubs' ES campaign.

	<p>also in the management and operations issues of the organization.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It has not been proven that fans with a high level of identification with their club have greater awareness and show greater support for the club's initiatives off the field, than more casual fans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variation of attitudes towards the environment in an apparently homogeneous group of supporters.
Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They studied the nature of CSR initiatives of clubs in the English and Spanish first leagues, in the 2018-2019 season. • They concluded that there is a time of transformation in the football industry to consider sustainable development. • They identified football as an excellent way to communicate in European society and in the world at large. • They stressed the potential of football to be a platform to promote the implementation of sustainability programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSR activities in sport. – The authors considered this an area of research that is becoming increasingly popular.
Lobillo Mora et al, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They explained the rebranding process of Real Betis Balompié, based on the pillars of sustainability. • They assessed the impact of this process on fans' perceptions of the brand. • They concluded that both the club and the fans agree on a holistic view of what CSR is and that its initiatives should be applied to the entire organization. • They considered that the club can be an agent of change. • They observed that even though the club's connection to sustainability is valued by supporters, they did not feel a calling to be part of the actions organized by the club. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social impact of the Forever Green Program in Seville or Andalusia. • Need to incorporate values related to environmental protection into the corporate culture of Spanish football and measurement of the social value of this incorporation.

Source: Self-elaborated

2.3. Sporting Clube de Portugal

Sporting was founded on July 1, 1906, by José de Alvalade, and is one of the largest sports organizations in Portugal, with over 22 thousand titles won in numerous sports. In men's professional football in particular, it has 55 trophies. (*Summary / Sporting Clube de Portugal official website*, no date; *Palmarés / Sporting Clube de Portugal official website*, no date).

Besides the more than 3.5 million supporters that the club has in Portugal, there are more than 400 clubs, branches and delegations around the world. Sporting's main goal is to win all competitions it disputes, contributing to the enthusiasm of fans and club members, and prioritizes as three pillars of its mission the respect for the club's tradition, for the members and for sport in general. Additionally, the club considers that its members are its most valuable asset (*Mission / Official Site of Sporting Clube de Portugal*, undated).

With regards to social responsibility, the club has six adapted sports disciplines practiced at the club and conducts social actions promoted by the Sporting Foundation, which has as one of its objectives to strengthen the relationship between the club and the community. (*The Foundation / Official website of Sporting Clube de Portugal*, no date; *Mission / Official website of Sporting Clube de Portugal*, undated; *Summary / Official website of Sporting Clube de Portugal*, no date).

In 1996, the club began a new cycle by creating Sporting Sociedade Desportiva de Futebol, which was listed on the Lisbon Stock Exchange two years later. With the addition of investors to the club's stakeholders, its objectives became not only linked to sports achievements, but also to the need for brand enhancement, intrinsically linked to the investment in new market areas and the search for competitive advantage as a business group (*Mission / Official website of Sporting Clube de Portugal*, undated; *Summary / Sporting Clube de Portugal official website*, no date).

3. Methodology

The main goal of this dissertation is to promote knowledge on the topic of ES in the strategy of organizations, especially in the professional football sector in Portugal. The study focuses on one club in particular – Sporting –, analyzing the level of awareness on this issue by its supporters and how they are impacted by the club's efforts to promote ES. The guiding line of this investigation resulted from the main issues taken from the literature about ES in sport, in particular in the football sector. These allowed the definition of the research questions, which were later associated with research objectives (Table 2).

Table 2 – The main issues taken from the literature about ES in sport, in particular in the football sector, the research questions and the research objectives.

Key Research Question: What is the level of awareness of Sporting fans to the thematic of ES in the organization's strategy and how are they impacted by the club's efforts to promote it?		
Main Issues (Author, Year)	Research Question	Research Objective
Strategic integration of CSR in contexts other than the UK; CSR measures in football; Environmental component of CSR in football. (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020) CSR activities in sport. (Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020) Sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation in sport. (González-Serrano et al., 2020)	RQ1: In which way is CSR, in particular ES, relevant in the football sector for Sporting's supporters?	RO1: Assess how Sporting fans perceive the relevance of ES in the football sector.
Level of fans' awareness of sustainability issues, compared to the efforts of their clubs. (Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022)	RQ2: How do Sporting's supporters perceive the club's efforts in implementing ES measures?	RO2: Analyze the level of effectiveness of Sporting's communication with its external stakeholders, namely its supporters, on the integration of ES into its organizational strategy.
Fans' perception of holding sporting events in a sustainable way. (González-Serrano et al., 2020) Role of supporters in "sustainability transfer". (Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022) Stakeholders' perspectives and expectations regarding the strategic integration of CSR. (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020)	RQ3: What impact have Sporting's efforts in including ES actions in its organizational strategy in its supporters?	RO3: Evaluate how supporters are impacted by Sporting's efforts to adopt more sustainable practices as part of its organizational strategy.

Supporters with lower levels of identification with their club. (Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022)	RQ4: Is there a relation between supporters' high identification with Sporting and their interest in issues non-related with the club's sports performance, in particular with ES initiatives?	RO4: Examine if there is a relationship between a high level of identification of fans with the club and their interest in issues unrelated to the team's performance, such as the implementation of ES measures.
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Source: Self-elaborated

Since the chosen topic is not yet studied in depth in the literature, an exploratory study was carried out, with the aim of determining what has already been studied in its context, seeking new views on the subject, elaborating questions and analyzing different perspectives on the matter (Peters & Simaens, 2020). To collect, interpret and report the information, a qualitative research methodology was used (Gravetter & Forzano, 2016). The choice fell on this type of methodology because the aim was to answer questions based on the experience and perspective of the study's participants, collecting data in order to understand in depth the topic under investigation (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Peters & Simaens, 2020).

For data collection, asynchronous interviews were conducted, often used in qualitative studies, with a mixture of closed (questions 1 to 8) and open (questions 9 to 14) questions, to obtain contextualized and complete data. Questions 1 to 8 aimed at characterizing the interview sample, in terms of gender, age, academic qualifications, level of identification with the club and usage of communication channels. Questions 9 to 14 were exploratory and aimed at obtaining the participants views on the topic in study. Table 3 presents the interview open questions, relating these with the research objectives,

In the impossibility of conducting interviews to all the Sporting supporters, a non-probability convenience sampling was performed, consisting of 102 individuals. The questions were distributed online to individuals aged 18 years or older, through a Google form. In order to try to ensure that the sample consisted exclusively of Sporting supporters, and prevent fans of other clubs from answering the questions, the form was only distributed to individuals who were believed to be Sporting fans (Lobillo Mora et al., 2021). The interviews took place in March 2023.

Data analysis was performed using KH Coder 3 and N-Gram Generator. From the original 102 respondents, seven were discarded at this stage, due to a high number of not applicable (N/A) or missing answers. Therefore, 95 answers were considered for the data analysis.

Table 3 – The research objectives and the open interview questions.

Research Objective	Interview Question
<p>RO1: Assess how Sporting fans perceive the relevance of ES in the football sector.</p>	<p>IQ9: Corporate social responsibility is related to the economic, environmental and social impacts of companies' activities. During the last few years, the themes of corporate social responsibility and ES have been the subject of study in various sectors of activity, including professional football. In your opinion, why is this issue relevant in the football sector?</p>
<p>RO2: Analyze the level of effectiveness of Sporting's communication with its external stakeholders, namely its supporters, on the integration of ES into its organizational strategy.</p>	<p>IQ10: Are you aware of ES measures already implemented or integrated in the current Sporting strategy? If yes, what are the three most relevant measures?</p> <p>IQ11: Do you consider that Sporting should implement more measures of ES? If yes, what are the three main measures you would like to see implemented?</p>
<p>RO3: Evaluate how supporters are impacted by Sporting's efforts to adopt more sustainable practices as part of its organizational strategy.</p>	<p>IQ12: Do you consider it important that Sporting organizes its sports events in a sustainable way? If so, would you participate in more/same/fewer events than at present?</p> <p>IQ13: Do you consider that the implementation and communication of sustainable measures by Sporting has/had an impact on your daily life and on your choice of a more sustainable lifestyle?</p>
<p>RO4: Examine if there is a relationship between a high level of identification of fans with the club and their interest in issues unrelated to the team's performance, such as the implementation of ES measures.</p>	<p>IQ14: In Spain, Real Betis Balompié joined the Forever Green initiative in 2020 and started a process of rebranding, focusing on a strategy allied to sustainable development. Would your feeling towards Sporting change in any way if it joined an ES program? If yes, in what way?</p>

Source: Self-elaborated

4. Findings

4.1. Sample characterization

In the interview sample, 68% of the participants were male, 31% were female and 1% answered other (Figure 1).

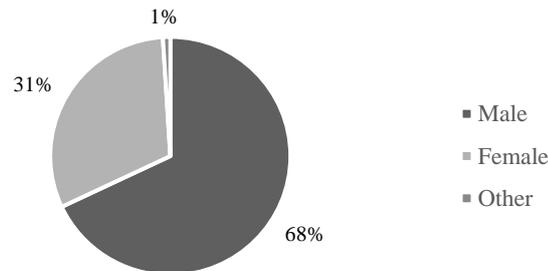


Figure 1 – Gender distribution of the interview sample. Source: Self-elaborated

The age group with the highest number of participants was 25-34 with 43%, followed by 18-24 with 20%, 45-54 with 18% and 35-44 with 13%. The age groups with the lowest number of participants were 55-64 with 5% and >65 with 1% (Figure 2).

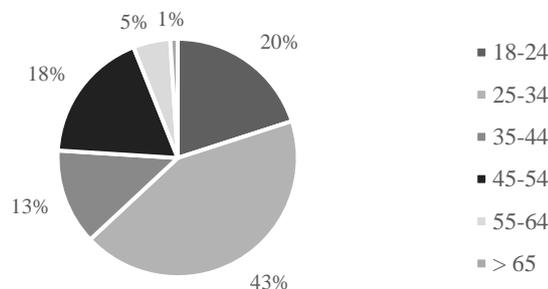


Figure 2 – Age group distribution of the interview sample. Source: Self-elaborated

In regards with the academic qualifications (Figure 3), 40% of the participants have a bachelor's degree, 37% have a master's degree, 17% concluded high school, while 4% haven't completed high school and 2% have a doctoral degree.

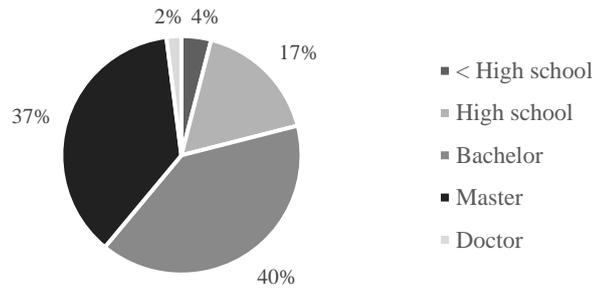


Figure 3 – Distribution of academic qualifications of the interview sample. Source: Self-elaborated

For the purpose of this research, it is relevant to characterize the sample according with the participants level of identification with Sporting (Figure 4). The results show that 33% of the participants are Sporting members (Figure 4.A), only 6% attend Sporting’s general meetings (Figure 4.B) and 25% vote in the Sporting’s elections (Figure 4.C). In regards with the attendance to Sporting’s football games at the home stadium (José Alvalade stadium) (Figure 4.D), 46% of the participants answered that they usually attend up to 6 games per season, 28% never attend Sporting’s matches, 9% attend 7-12 games per season, 8% attend all Sporting’s matches and 7% attend 13-18 games per season (Sporting plays at least 17 games per season at its home stadium).

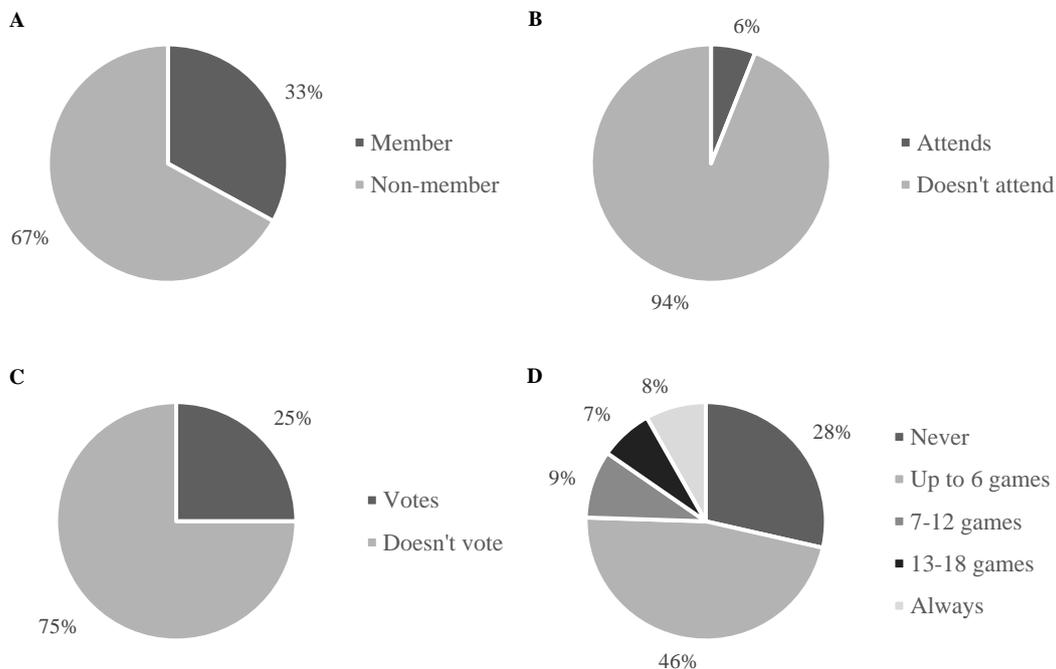


Figure 4 – Sample characterization according with the participants identification with Sporting. A: Distribution of Sporting members. B: General meetings attendance. C: Voters in Sporting’s elections. D: Attendance to Sporting’s football games (number of games per season). Source: Self-elaborated

Finally, it is important to understand which communication channels connect the interviewees with the club (Figure 5 **Erro! A origem da referência não foi encontrada.**). The results show that the preferred communication channels amongst the participants are Sporting’s Instagram page (63%), Sporting TV (54%) and Sporting’s YouTube channel (53%). The club’s website and Facebook page are less popular, with 28% and 25% of respondents selecting these options, respectively. The options “None” and “Other” were selected 13% and 12%, respectively. The least used communication channels by the participants are the Sporting’s newspaper (8%), the Sporting’s LinkedIn (6%), strategic plan (2%) and sustainability report (1%).

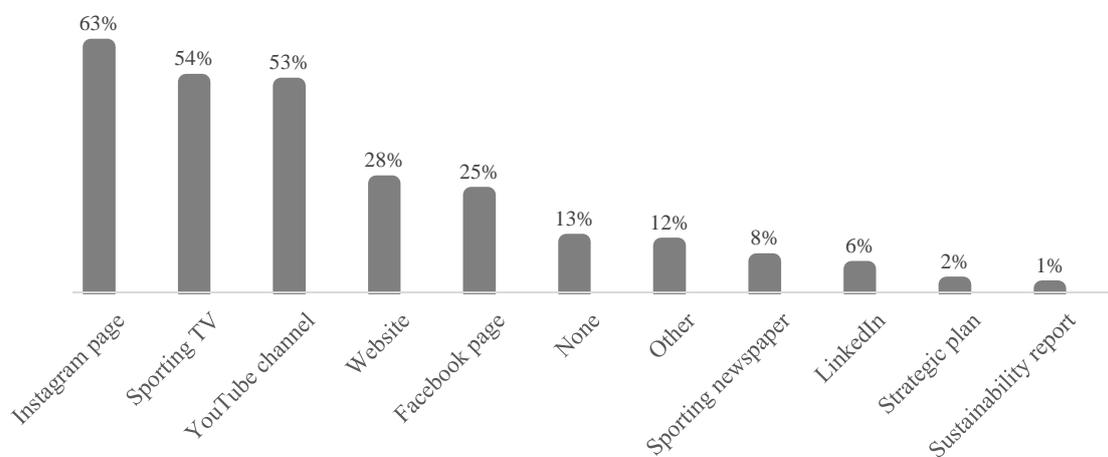


Figure 5 – Sporting communication channels consulted by the interview sample. More than one option could be selected; the values represent the percentage of the total respondents that selected each option. Source: Self-elaborated

4.2. Analysis of open questions

The ninth question of the survey was the first open question. It briefly described the concept of CSR and highlighted that, during the last few years, the themes of CSR and ES have been the subject of study in various sectors of activity, including professional football (see Table 3). To this question – *In your opinion, why is this issue relevant in the football sector?* –, 87% of the participants answered that they found this issue relevant in the sector, while 3% revealed that for them it was not relevant (Figure 6). From the participants that found this issue relevant in the football sector, 95% appointed at least one reason why they have this opinion. For these answers a word frequency list was generated using KH Coder and a trigram was obtained with N-Gram Generator. The word frequency list (Figure 7) shows that the two most frequently used

words were “football” and “sector”. Words like “people”, “social”, “society”, “important”, “responsibility” and “impact” are also highly mentioned. The trigram (Table 4) shows that some of the most used combinations of three words are “corporate social responsibility”, “impact football society” and “sectors corporate social”. Examples of other combinations are “urgent issue football”, “utmost importance responsibility” or “lead example football”.

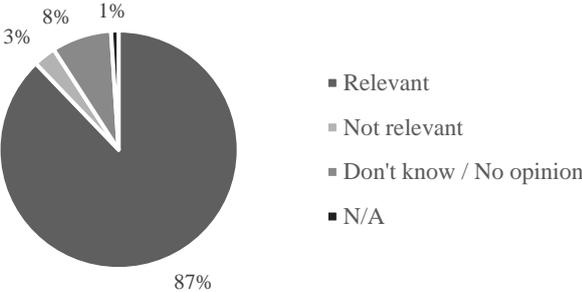


Figure 6 – Importance of ES measures in the football sector for the supporters. Source: Self-elaborated

List				
#	Word	POS / Conj.	Frequency	
1	football	Noun	49	
2	sector	Noun	26	
3	people	Noun	23	
4	club	Noun	19	
5	social	Adj	18	
6	society	Noun	17	
7	sport	Noun	16	
8	important	Adj	12	
9	responsibility	Noun	12	
10	impact	Noun	11	
11	environmental	Adj	10	
12	relevant	Adj	9	
13	sustainability	Noun	9	
14	company	Noun	8	
15	example	Noun	8	
16	influence	Noun	8	
17	sustainable	Adj	8	
18	think	Verb	8	
19	way	Noun	8	
20	environment	Noun	7	

Figure 7 – Word frequency list (top 20) from the reasons highlighted by the supporters for the importance of ES in the football sector. Source: KH Coder 3

Table 4 – Trigram (top 20) from the reasons highlighted by the supporters for the importance of ES in the football sector.

	N-gram	Frequency	Probability	Strength
1	corporate social responsibility	4	1	1.39
2	impact football society	2	0.22	0.15
3	sectors corporate social	2	0.18	0.13
4	behaviors allow club	1	1	0
5	allow club save	1	1	0
6	save money various	1	1	0

7	departments raising awareness	1	1	0
8	personal lives global	1	1	0
9	global warming sustainability	1	1	0
10	warming sustainability common	1	1	0
11	home relevant protection	1	1	0
12	protection environment increasingly	1	1	0
13	urgent issue football	1	1	0
14	stages passing messages	1	1	0
15	messages groups age	1	1	0
16	utmost importance responsibility	1	1	0
17	educate lead example	1	1	0
18	lead example football	1	1	0
19	objectives areas entertainment	1	1	0
20	entertainment sector relevance	1	1	0

Source: Self-elaborated, based on N-Gram Generator

Question 10 asked *Are you aware of ES measures already implemented or integrated in the current Sporting strategy?*. The majority of the participants were not aware of measures implemented (87%), while 12% were aware of measures (Figure 8). The second part of the question was *If yes, what are the three most relevant measures?*. From the 11 participants that answered being aware of initiatives already implemented or integrated in the current Sporting strategy, nine were able to highlight three measures, one was able to mention one measure and one couldn't mention any measures. The answers in which at least one sustainability measure was suggested were analyzed using KH coder and N-Gram Generator. The word frequency list (Figure 9) shows that the two most mentioned words were “electric” and “vehicle”. Words like “consumption”, “solar”, “energy”, “panel” and “fleet” were also amongst the most mentioned. The words “academy” / “Alcochete” and “stadium” / “Alvalade” were also highly mentioned. The trigram (Table 5) shows that some of the most used combinations of three words were related to electric vehicles, energy efficiency and the Cristiano Ronaldo Academy.

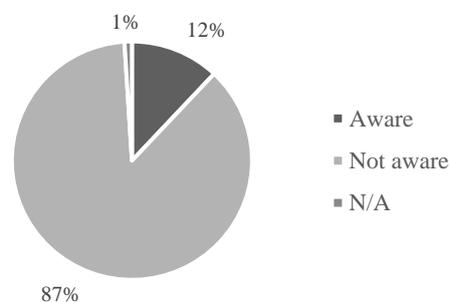


Figure 8 – Supporters' awareness about ES initiatives in the club's strategy. Source: Self-elaborated

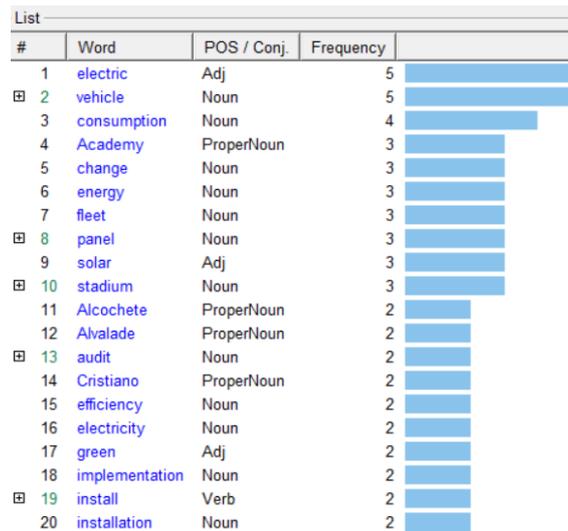


Figure 9 – Word frequency list (top 20) from the answers about supporters’ awareness on the club’s ES initiatives. Source: KH Coder 3

Table 5 – Trigram (top 20) from the answers about supporters’ awareness on the club’s ES initiatives.

	N-gram	Frequency	Probability	Strength
1	Cristiano Ronaldo academy	2	1	0.69
2	fleet electric vehicles	2	0.5	0.35
3	light vehicles electric	1	1	0
4	500 panels self	1	1	0
5	sustainability 2050 change	1	1	0
6	2050 change fleet	1	1	0
7	optimization energy consumption	1	1	0
8	facilities periodic audits	1	1	0
9	periodic audits correct	1	1	0
10	correct malfunctions identify	1	1	0
11	malfunctions identify opportunities	1	1	0
12	identify opportunities improvement	1	1	0
13	opportunities improvement increased	1	1	0
14	improvement increased efficiency	1	1	0
15	increased efficiency water	1	1	0
16	regular audits implementation	1	1	0
17	intelligent systems automatic	1	1	0
18	systems automatic irrigation	1	1	0
19	automatic irrigation scheduling	1	1	0
20	irrigation scheduling regularization	1	1	0

Source: Self-elaborated, based on N-Gram Generator

To the 11th question – *Do you consider that Sporting should implement more measures of ES?* –, more than half of the participants answered “Yes” (57%), while 9% answered “No” and 2% “Maybe” (Figure 10). Also, 25% of the participants answered “Don’t know” or “No opinion”. From this 25%, a significant number of respondents considered they were not able to

answer, because they were not aware of measures already in place. The second part of the question was *If yes, what are the three main measures you would like to see implemented?*. From the participants that answered “Yes”, 76% were able to suggest at least one measure that they believe should be implemented. These answers were analyzed using KH coder and N-Gram Generator. The word frequency list (Figure 11) shows that the most mentioned word was “stadium”. Words like “energy”, “reduce”, “transport”, “plastic”, “water” and “ticket” were among the most mentioned. The trigram (Table 6) shows that some of the combinations used were related to equipment, traveling, tickets and the stadium.

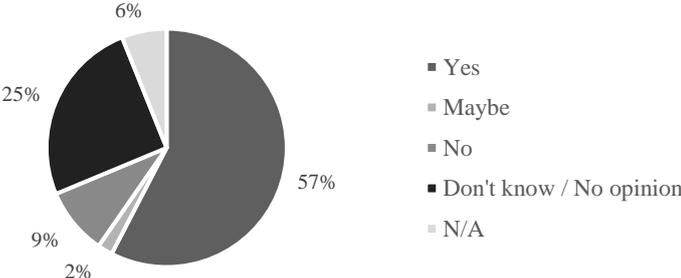


Figure 10 – Supporters’ opinion on whether the club should implement more measures of ES. Source: Self-elaborated

List				
#	Word	POS / Conj.	Frequency	
1	stadium	Noun	22	
2	use	Noun	11	
3	energy	Noun	10	
4	sustainable	Adj	9	
5	reduce	Verb	8	
6	transport	Noun	8	
7	consumption	Noun	7	
8	plastic	Noun	6	
9	water	Noun	6	
10	implement	Verb	5	
11	lawn	Noun	5	
12	ticket	Noun	5	
13	efficient	Adj	4	
14	irrigation	Noun	4	
15	lighting	Noun	4	
16	match	Noun	4	
17	measure	Noun	4	
18	travel	Noun	4	
19	use	Verb	4	
20	way	Noun	4	

Figure 11 – Word frequency list (top 20) from the list of initiatives that the supporters would like to see implemented. Source: KH Coder 3

Table 6 – Trigram (top 20) from the list of initiatives that the supporters would like to see implemented.

	N-gram	Frequency	Probability	Strength
1	reuse equipment making	1	1	0
2	available society avoiding	1	1	0
3	society avoiding need	1	1	0
4	build new ones	1	1	0
5	new ones avoid	1	1	0
6	air travel end	1	1	0
7	end annual creation	1	1	0
8	annual creation membership	1	1	0
9	led lighting stadium	1	1	0
10	eco pass ticket	1	1	0
11	pass ticket purchased	1	1	0
12	purchased supporter entitled	1	1	0
13	supporter entitled return	1	1	0
14	entitled return trip	1	1	0
15	trip public transport	1	1	0
16	number cars vicinity	1	1	0
17	vicinity stadium match	1	1	0
18	attractive sustainable policy	1	1	0
19	policy installation panel	1	1	0
20	installation panel area	1	1	0

Source: Self-elaborated, based on N-Gram Generator

Question 12 was *Do you consider it important that Sporting organizes its sports events in a sustainable way?*. The majority of the participants answered “Yes” (77%). While 13% of the interviewees answered “Don’t know”, “No opinion” or “Irrelevant”, 4% answered “No” and 2% said “Maybe” (Figure 12.A). From the participants that considered important that Sporting organizes its sports events in a sustainable way, only 60% answered the second part of the question – *If so, would you participate in more/same/fewer events than at present?*. From these, 42% considered it wouldn't have an impact on their participation, whereas 18% said they would participate in more events (Figure 12.B). None of the supporters answered that they would attend fewer events.

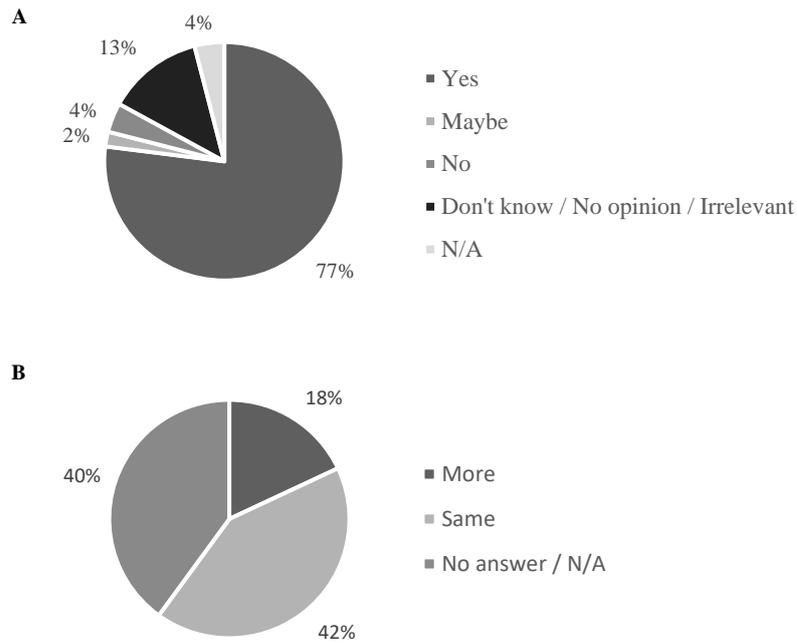


Figure 12 – Supporters’ opinion on the organization of sports events in a sustainable way. A: Importance for the supporters that Sporting organizes the events sustainably. B: Impact on supporters’ attendance, for the supporters who answered “Yes” to the first part of the question. Source: Self-elaborated

In question 13 it was asked *Do you consider that the implementation and communication of sustainable measures by Sporting has/had an impact on your daily life and on your choice of a more sustainable lifestyle?*. More than half of the respondents answered “Yes” (53%), while 29% of the participants answered “No” and 11% “Maybe” (Figure 13).

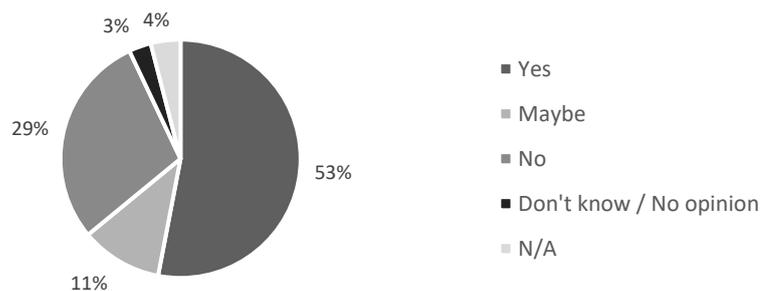


Figure 13 – Supporters’ opinion on the impact that the implementation and communication of sustainable measures by Sporting has on their daily life and on their choice of a more sustainable lifestyle. Source: Self-elaborated

Lastly, in question 14 a brief reference to Real Betis Balompié was made. It was explained that the club joined the Forever Green initiative in 2020 and started a process of rebranding, focusing on a strategy promoting sustainable development. Then it was asked *Would your*

feeling towards Sporting change in any way if it joined an ES program?. The answers were quite balanced, with 49% of the participants considering their feeling towards the club would change, while 41% said it wouldn't (Figure 14). From the participants that answered "Yes", 91% answered the second part of the question *If yes, in what way?*. From those, all participants considered the feeling towards the club would change in a positive way. All answers were analyzed using KH coder and N-Gram Generator. The word frequency list (Figure 15) shows that the most mentioned words were "club" and "pride". The trigram (Table 7) shows that some of the most used combination of words were "increase wouldn't change", "inspiring example environmental", "regardless make prouder" or "noble causes related".

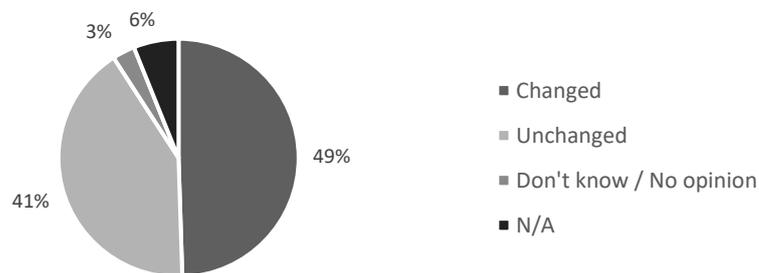


Figure 14 – Supporters’ opinion on whether their feeling towards the club would change if it joined an ES program. Source: Self-elaborated

List				
#	Word	POS / Conj.	Frequency	
1	club	Noun	31	
2	pride	Noun	12	
3	change	Verb	8	
4	way	Noun	7	
5	proud	Adj	6	
6	SCP	ProperNoun	6	
7	sustainability	Noun	6	
8	think	Verb	6	
9	environmental	Adj	5	
10	feel	Verb	5	
11	feeling	Noun	5	
12	Sporting	ProperNoun	5	
13	better	Adj	4	
14	cause	Noun	4	
15	good	Adj	4	
16	greater	Adj	4	
17	important	Adj	4	
18	issue	Noun	4	
19	measure	Noun	4	
20	planet	Noun	4	

Figure 15 – Word frequency list (top 20) from the supporters’ opinion on whether their feeling towards the club would change if it joined an ES program. Source: KH Coder 3

Table 7 – Trigram (top 20) from the supporters’ opinion on whether their feeling towards the club would change if it joined an ES program.

	N-gram	Frequency	Probability	Strength
1	increase wouldn't change	1	1	0
2	fact attached club	1	1	0
3	attached club combine	1	1	0
4	combine great passion	1	1	0
5	greatest values life	1	1	0
6	life sustainability important	1	1	0
7	step members nice	1	1	0
8	members nice club	1	1	0
9	nice club linked	1	1	0
10	linked evidence sustainability	1	1	0
11	evidence sustainability inspiring	1	1	0
12	inspiring example environmental	1	1	0
13	integrate environmental sustainability	1	1	0
14	regardless make prouder	1	1	0
15	prouder football club	1	1	0
16	supports develops programmes	1	1	0
17	develops programmes noble	1	1	0
18	noble causes related	1	1	0
19	related climate change	1	1	0
20	climate change issues	1	1	0

Source: Self-elaborated, based on N-Gram Generator

5. Discussion

Numerous authors have reported a change of paradigm in the football sector, with professional football clubs making an effort to put CSR, and in particular ES, in their agendas (González-Serrano et al., 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Pedersen & Rosati, 2019; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). This has become an increasingly popular area of research and several authors have highlighted the need for studying the strategic integration of CSR in football clubs (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). Therefore, the aim of this dissertation was to contribute to the gap of knowledge about the thematic of ES in the organizational strategy of professional football clubs in Portugal, studying the case of Sporting in particular.

The first research question of this dissertation was *In which way is CSR, in particular ES, relevant in the football sector for Sporting's supporters?*. Figure 6 shows that the majority of Sporting supporters that were interviewed find CSR, in particular ES, relevant in the sector. Apart from the general agreement that this matter is an urgent issue, the answers suggest that the supporters believe that football clubs can have an impact in society and can lead their followers by example (see Figure 7 and Table 4). These findings are aligned with what was found in the literature, namely with the study about Real Betis Balompié, conducted by Lobillo Mora et al. (2021), which showed that Betis fans were aware of the social responsibility sports organizations have and their role not only in protecting the environment, but also in raising awareness for that thematic.

While actually implementing ES measures is commendable and a positive step towards its consideration in the football sector, it is important to communicate these initiatives, as football clubs have the capacity of impacting large audiences, due to their visibility (Fifka & Jaeger, 2020; Hugaerts et al., 2021; Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020). It is highlighted in the literature that channeling this communication through the clubs' annual reports is not effective, as these are only consulted by a fraction of the target audience (Ribeiro et al., 2019; Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022). In fact, this study's results show that only a very small percentage of the supporters reads the club's strategic plan and sustainability report (see Figure 5). Also, less than one third of the participants consult Sporting's website. Since Sporting communicates its ES initiatives mostly through the club's official website and annual reports, it is, therefore, not surprising that the majority of the participants revealed not being aware of ES measures already implemented or integrated in Sporting's current strategy (Figure 8). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the most popular communication channels between the

participants are Sporting's Instagram page, Sporting TV and Sporting's YouTube channel. These would, therefore, be good options for communicating the club's sustainability initiatives and reach a larger audience, making the most of the club's visibility.

More than half of the interviewees consider that Sporting should implement more measures of ES (see Figure 10) and suggested initiatives they would like to see implemented. The actions mentioned seem to go along with the measures already being considered by the club, namely transportation, energy efficiency and turning José Alvalade Stadium more sustainable. This corroborates the findings by Ráthonyi-Ódor et al. (2020), as they found that the clubs they studied were not communicating their ES actions effectively, which made it difficult to access their commitment towards making sustainability part of their organizational strategy. Thus, this dissertation's results made it possible to evaluate the awareness of the supporters about this relevant topic and analyze it against Sporting's efforts in that field, as suggested by Lozano & Barreiro-Gen (2022). In this line, the second research question of this dissertation was *How do Sporting's supporters perceive the club's efforts in implementing ES measures?*. The results reveal that there is a gap between the initiatives Sporting is putting in place and the awareness of its supporters of those efforts, suggesting that Sporting's communication of the ES measures being implemented is not being effective.

For Sporting, there is, therefore, a missed opportunity here. First, the club could grab this chance to improve its image and, possibly, gain competitive advantage. Secondly, Sporting could act as an agent of change and inspire its supporters through the initiatives it is implementing. As a matter of fact, Figure 13 reveals that more than half of the participants consider that the implementation and communication of sustainable measures by Sporting has or would have an impact on their daily life and on their choice of a more sustainable lifestyle. This is in line with the results of the study by Casper et al. (2014), in which the authors found that it is possible to create a positive impact in the supporters that attend sports events, by raising awareness about ES during the event. Lobillo Mora et al. (2021) also found that Betis supporters believed the club had the potential of being an agent of change in regards to ES. Additionally, being aware of the impact big sports events have on the environment is a key aspect when promoting sustainability in this sector (Hugaerts et al., 2021; Pache, 2020; Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020; Tóffano Pereira et al., 2019). González-Serrano et al. (2020) suggested that the supporters views about this topic are important and should be studied. This dissertation's findings show that the majority of the participants consider that Sporting must organize its sports events in a sustainable way (see Figure 12). However, only a small percentage of interviewees would consider attending more events, if those were more sustainable, invoking

non-related reasons or that they would attend Sporting's events nevertheless. With these findings, it was possible to answer the third research question of this dissertation – *What impact have Sporting's efforts in including ES actions in its organizational strategy in its supporters?*. The results indicate that with the implementation and effective communication of ES measures, the club could potentially inspire its supporters in the pursuit of a more sustainable lifestyle. However, the realization of Sporting's sports events in a sustainable way, although relevant for the participants, doesn't seem to have an impact on their decision to attend more events.

Even though, in theory, the participants showed a low level of identification with the club, with only a third being a member of the club, less than a third voting in the Sporting's elections, a very small percentage attending Sporting's general meetings and less than a quarter attending a considerable number of the games played at the home stadium each season (see Figure 4), this sentiment of following the club unconditionally was clear throughout other questions of the interview. When asked if their feeling towards Sporting would change if the club joined an ES program, the participants seemed to show a feeling of pride towards the club, with a considerable percentage stating they would be proud followers in any case and almost half of the participants saying their pride for the club would increase (see Figure 14). Kellison & Cianfrone (2022) suggested future researchers to study whether supporters with lower levels of team identification wouldn't be as concerned about non-performance-related initiatives. Following that suggestion, the last research question of this dissertation was *Is there a relation between supporters' high identification with Sporting and their interest in issues non-related with the club's sporting performance, in particular with ES initiatives?*. In what regards ES, the findings show that it doesn't seem to be the case, with the interviewees showing high interest in this thematic and its association with the football sector, in general, and with Sporting, in particular, while showing a low level of identification with the club.

Table 8 presents the main suggestions for future research taken from the literature review and the summary of this dissertation's main contributions.

Table 8 – Contributions to the research gaps about ES in the sports sector identified in the literature.

Author, Year	Main Topics	Main Theoretical / Practical Contribution
Fifka & Jaeger, 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic integration of CSR in contexts other than the UK. • CSR measures in football. • Environmental component of CSR in football. • Stakeholders' perspectives and expectations regarding the strategic integration of CSR, using the <i>framework</i> created. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of awareness of Sporting's supporters regarding CSR integration, in particular ES, in the football sector.
González-Serrano et al., 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior of so-called green sport consumers. • Celebration of sports events in a sustainable way, at different dimension levels. • Socio-economic impact and fans' perception of holding sporting events in a sustainable way. • Sustainable entrepreneurship and innovation in sport. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporters' opinion on organization of sporting events in a sustainable way and its impact on their participation in the events.
Lozano & Barreiro-Gen, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of football clubs from different countries. • Level of fans' awareness of sustainability issues, compared to the efforts of their clubs. • Role of supporters in "sustainability transfer". • Football clubs that are leaders in the implementation of sustainable measures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of supporters regarding sustainability measures already implemented or integrated in the current Sporting's strategy. • Supporters' opinion on Sporting implementing more ES initiatives and analysis of alignment between their opinion and Sporting's initiatives. • Level of efficacy of Sporting's ES initiatives communication.
Kellison & Cianfrone, 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporters with lower levels of identification with their club. • Influence of the performance on the field and the state of development of the clubs' ES campaign. • Variation of attitudes towards the environment in an apparently homogeneous group of supporters. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporters' interest in ES and its association with the football sector (in particular, Sporting), while showing a low level of identification with the club.
Ráthonyi-Ódor et al., 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CSR activities in sport. – The authors considered this an area of research that is becoming increasingly popular. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible impact on the fans of CSR integration in football clubs (in particular, Sporting).
Lobillo Mora et al., 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social impact of the Forever Green Program in Seville or Andalusia. • Need to incorporate values related to environmental protection into the corporate culture of Spanish football and measurement of the social value of this incorporation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible impact on the fans of CSR integration in football clubs (in particular, Sporting).

Source: Self-elaborated

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the knowledge gap in the literature on ES in the strategy of sports organizations, in particular football clubs. It allowed for the identification of the level of awareness of football fans, in this case Sporting's supporters, on the thematic of ES in the organization's strategy and how they are (or could be) impacted by the club's efforts to promote it. One of the main conclusions is that there isn't an alignment between the initiatives being implemented by the club and the awareness of its supporters of those efforts. This highlighted the need for a better communication strategy, which could potentially bring competitive advantage to Sporting and create a positive impact on its fans.

The findings show that Sporting's fans believe this issue is relevant in the football sector. Unfortunately, the majority of the supporters doesn't seem to be aware of the initiatives the club is putting into practice or planning for the near future, many being of the opinion that Sporting should implement more ES initiatives, especially in regard to transportation, energy efficiency, the club's stadium and sustainable sports events. Even though the sample showed a low level of identification with the club, the interviewees showed interest and concerns about the topic of ES in professional football. In fact, the fans who were interviewed believed that having Sporting leading by example in this issue could potentially inspire them on their daily lives.

Thus, this dissertation allowed for the identification of the level of awareness of Sporting supporters regarding CSR integration, in particular ES, in the football sector. Moreover, it made it possible to understand the fans' level of awareness regarding initiatives already integrated in Sporting's strategy, the alignment between those initiatives and the supporters' opinion on which should be the club's priorities regarding ES, and the possible impacts on the fans of CSR integration in Sporting's strategy.

Some limitations were encountered, while performing this study. First, there was a lack of previous research about the Portuguese football sector, focusing on ES integration in the clubs' strategies. Secondly, the current study focused only on one football club, which doesn't allow for a full overview of the sector in Portugal. Finally, because the supporters were mostly not aware of the initiatives already implemented by Sporting, it was hard to assess the impact of those measures in the fans daily life, making the answers to that question notably hypothetical in most of the cases.

As it was highlighted by many authors in the literature, there is a need for more research about this topic. Following this dissertation's contribution, some suggestions for future studies can be made. It would be interesting to study the internal perspective of Sporting in regards to ES integration in the club's strategy, in order to understand what measures are planned, how does the club perceive the fans opinion on this theme and what plans does it have to create a positive impact on its fans and on the community in general. It would also be important to expand the research to other football clubs in Portugal, so it would be possible to have an overview of the panorama in Portugal. Finally, it would also be relevant to study how following a strategy allied to ES would financially impact the clubs, considering the importance of the pursuit of profit for any company, and for this sector in particular.

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