# LUISS 🏛

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**Chair of Sustainable Strategies for Business Leaders**

# "The ESG Impact of Football: Sustainability in Starting Line-Up"

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**A.A. 2023-2024**

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**1.1. Problem Statement**

The football industry, as well as many others, is facing an increasingly pressing challenge: sustainability. Although the ecological impact of football - ranging from the construction of stadiums to energy consumption and many other aspects - is significant, when it comes to sustainability it is not just an environmental issue. This also encompasses social and economic dimensions, reflecting the profound impact the sport has on communities and its potential to influence behavior and social values. The concept of sustainability is multifaceted and evolving: it involves transitioning to greener operations, promoting social responsibility and seeking economic stability.

The transformations brought about by the growing awareness of the importance of sustainability raise questions about what the future of the organization in football will look like. No doubt, there will be a greater presence of these considerations in the various projects and initiatives of the clubs, but how far will they go? And above all, how will compliance with and achievement of sustainability standards be measured and ensured? These questions open the debate on how sustainability can be effectively integrated into the football industry.

**1.2. Research Question**

The urgency of facing the great challenge of sustainability has led to devoting more and more attention to this issue. Therefore, in this context, the 'Strength Through Unity' strategy launched by UEFA marked a turning point for the football industry. It aims to promote sustainability in European football; specifically, it focuses on uniting the efforts of clubs, fans, federations and other stakeholders to address environmental, social and economic challenges, improving sustainable practices and promoting positive change within the football industry. However, the true effectiveness of such measures is perceived differently among various stakeholders, especially fans, who are not only spectators but also active and influential participants in football. In fact, the cognitive contribution that this thesis intends to give is to explore the perception of fans regarding the effectiveness of this strategy, in order to answer the following research question:

*"How do fans perceive the effectiveness of environmental measures, indicated by the 'Strength Through Unity' project, implemented by Italian clubs during sporting events?"*

## 1.3. Purpose

The main aim of this thesis is to examine the different ways in which sustainable initiatives are perceived by fans in the context of Italian football, with a particular focus on the practices adopted by clubs as part of UEFA's "Strength Through Unity" project. As a result, everything will be studied and observed from the fans' point of view. In particular, this research initially aims to understand the meaning that the latter give to the word "sustainability", together with their attitudes and reactions to the sustainability actions undertaken by their clubs, as well as to evaluate how these initiatives are communicated and put into practice. Through a qualitative analysis, based on semi-structured interviews, we will try to capture the nuances behind fans' opinions, exploring their direct experiences and observations during sporting events. Finally, it will investigate how fans perceive the effectiveness of the 'Strength Through Unity' strategy and what their expectations are for the future.

This study, therefore, aims to offer a detailed perspective on the active role that fans can play in promoting sustainability in football, highlighting both best practices and areas that need further improvement. In addition, the thesis aims to contribute to the broader debate on sustainability in the sports sector, proposing avenues of action that can strengthen environmental engagement in football and improve the overall fan experience.

## 1.4. Limitation of the study

In the context of this academic research, it is good to recognize the limitations that can affect study. One of the main limitations concerns the territory on which the study was conducted, in fact, the present thesis, focused on the perception of fans regarding sustainable initiatives in football, is limited to the Italian territory. Furthermore, it does not include a fan for every Italian football team, but exclusively Roma, Lazio, Genoa and Inter. Thus, influencing the generalizability of the results at the national level. This choice was dictated by logistical reasons; however this could affect the ability to extend the conclusions to a broader context, limiting the generalizability of the results at the national level. Another limitation derives from the methodology adopted: the qualitative nature of the study implies that the data collected are based on subjective perceptions, which, although rich in nuances and details, do not allow statistical generalizations to be made. Finally, the third limitation concerns the concept of sustainability: since it is very extensive and difficult to define uniquely, it may be that not all its facets have been discussed.

Starting from these limitations, future research could extend the investigation to a wider sample of teams, explore other dimensions of sustainability or adopt a quantitative approach to complement and enrich the qualitative results obtained.

**Chapter 2: Literature Review**

**2.1. The Football Sector**

**2.1.1. History of Football as a Popular and Global Sport**

Football, commonly known as 'the beautiful game', has transcended continental and cultural barriers to become a globally renowned sport. It arose in England, in its current form, during the 19th century. Other alternative versions of football have existed for a long time and are considered part of football history.

Starting 3,000 years ago, in old Mesoamerica, the first team game was called "Tchatali", involving a ball made by a rock, which on some occasions would symbolize the sun. Through China, in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, "Cuju" was known as the first "round ball game" (stitched leather with fur or feathers inside). The game was played on an area of a square and was the first that also involved kicking. To Ancient Greece, a ball made of shreds of leather filled with hair but with a low status. As in Ancient Rome, where ball games were not included in the big arenas. It was the Roman culture that would bring football to the British island (Goldblatt 2008). The most widely accepted story tells us that the game found its roots in the twelfth century in England, where some games like football were already played on the roads. The games were performed in vast regions of towns with a high number of participants, resulting in destruction and occasionally player deaths (Macfarlane, 2022). However, it took a while before modern football's elements were implemented: rugby and football shared numerous differences for a long time, including the size of the ball, the number of players, and the duration of a match. In 1863, in London, the first Football Association was formed, and it was ruled that using one's hands to carry the ball was prohibited. However, the game continued to develop in the years below, with much flexibility of the rules. The British working class first used the sport as a kind of entertainment, moreover, the game would rapidly spread due to British colonization activities and people who migrated to other regions of the world. Football is expected to gain significant popularity, particularly in South America and India. Since the fifteenth century, there have been unofficial, disorganized football clubs (Robertson, 2004).

The industrial revolution played a significant role in the formation of teams by causing bigger gatherings of individuals in public spaces like factories, bars, and churches. Larger cities had football teams, which the new railroads could transport to neighboring cities. Public school teams dominated football in the beginning, but eventually, worker-based teams would account for the bulk of teams. As more teams started to offer top players a salary to join their teams, things started to shift again.

This would mark the beginning of a protracted and sometimes contentious transitional phase that would see the game advance to a professional level. The game's popularity grew to the point in the 1880s where tickets were offered for the contests. Ultimately, professional football was made lawful in 1885, and the Football League was founded three years later (Giulianotti, 2004).

Historically, women were not allowed to play games for a very long time. The history of women in football extends back to the late 1800s. The inaugural women's match took place in Inverness in 1888 (Guttmann, 2023).

When the Football Association Challenge Cup (FA Cup) was held in 1871, it turned into the first significant competition. The next year saw the first-ever encounter between two national teams. the game involving Scotland and England. Four national teams competed in the inaugural international competition in 1883: England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Although it originated in Britain, football soon spread to other countries in Europe. In 1904, representatives from the following nations France, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland signed the foundation act that established the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) (Butler, 1991). Since they created the game, England and the other British nations did not initially join FIFA and did not see the need to submit to a body. but would wait until 1950 to compete in the World Cup. In 1908, football would become an official sport at the Olympics Game for the first time. Up until the 1930 FIFA World Cup, the national football competition of the Olympic Games would be the most prestigious and women's football wasn't introduced until 1996. Today, the FIFA World Cup is the only sporting event that can be compared to the Summer Olympics. It was originally held in Uruguay in 1930, and it has since been held every four years (with two exceptions because of World War II). The World Cups became a global spectacle that not only affirmed the popularity of football but also served as a platform that connected nations and cultures. China hosted the inaugural Women's World Cup in 1991 and has been held every four years since then (Tomlinson, 2014).

Football has been utilized as a vehicle in recent years to promote sustainable behaviors and the ideas of social responsibility and environmental conservation. The soccer world's governing bodies, FIFA and UEFA, have been making steps to include sustainability into their operational and strategic choices as well as their main events, such the FIFA World Cup and the UEFA Champions League, the biggest global tournament for clubs. (Chappelet, 2008; Kellison & Kim, 2017).

Football's evolution thus reflects its current status as a worldwide sport that also serves as a platform for sustainable development, demonstrating the sport's skills beyond athletics and entertainment. A quote from David Goldblatt's book *The Ball is Round* presents one answer:*"It offers the spotlight for individual brilliance while relishing the defiance and heart of collective endeavor. It has staged tragedy and comedy, epic and pantomime, an, unsophisticated music hall, and inaccessible*

*experimental performances. It does imperious triumphs, lucky escapes, impossible comebacks, and stubborn stalemates. It captures the brilliance of unpredictability, the uncertainty of the human heart and human skill, of improvisation and chance"* (Goldblatt, 2008).

### 2.1.2 Current Growth and Impact of the Football Industry Worldwide

Football is more than a sport. It has developed into a multibillion-dollar worldwide industry that makes a substantial contribution to the expansion and prosperity of the economy (Matheson, 2012). In its modern incarnation, the football industry affects several domains, from media and entertainment to travel and jobs.

Football has greatly expanded over the world thanks to improved transmission capabilities, rising commercialization, and a burgeoning fan base on several continents (Andreff, 2015). For example, football's enormous reach and potential as a corporate enterprise are demonstrated by the English Premier League, which is aired in 212 countries and reaches an estimated 4.7 billion people (Tsjeng, 2016).

The economic impact of football also cannot be underestimated. A study by Deloitte (2023) highlighted that the top five European football leagues generated a combined revenue of €17.2 billion in the 2021–22 season.

Based on the analysis, the European football market generated €29.5 billion in revenue in 2021–2022 (compared to €27.6 billion in 2020–211), a 7% rise. Revenue growth was driven by record matchday and commercial income in the 2021–2022 season, following the elimination of pandemic constraints. The Premier League, Bundesliga, La Liga, Serie A, and Ligue 1 are the "big five" European leagues with revenue growth of 10% to €17.2 billion, exceeding the pre-pandemic benchmark of €17 billion in 2018–19. Analyzing one league at time, the Premier League was able to maintain its lead in the market and surpass the competition thanks to these teams' 12% growth in overall sales in the 2021–2022 season, which resulted in a record-breaking 6.4 billion (£5.5 bn) in total revenue (Deloitte, 2023).

Despite La Liga clubs' overall revenue rising by 11% to €3.3bn in the 2021/22 season, La Liga revenues are still about half that of the Premier League. The primary growth driver of Spanish top-tier teams' combined revenue in 2022–2023 was the €353 million rise in matchday revenues to €409 million over the previous season, which was made possible by the easing of COVID-19 restrictions towards the end of 2021 (Deloitte, 2023).

Immediately after the Spanish League, in terms of revenue generated, we have Bundesliga, with a growth of 5% to 3.1 billion in 2020-21 resulting from improved matchday revenues (€254m increase) and commercial revenues (€169m increase).

Finally, the value of domestic and foreign television rights declined, and as a result, Serie A was the only league among the "big five" to report a decline in overall revenue in 2021–2022, with total revenue falling by 7% (€171m) to €2.4bn. However, out of the "big five" leagues, Ligue 1 teams saw the most percentage rise in collective income in 2021/22, rising 26% (or €412m) to a record high of €2bn. New commercial agreements and an increase in matchday income following the epidemic were the main drivers of this development.

Operating profits fell by €1.8 billion since 2018/19 as a result of a 15% increase in wage costs from 2018/19 to €12.3bn in the 2021/22 season, outpacing overall aggregate revenue growth among the "big five." The "Big five" clubs recorded a €324 million loss for the 2021–2022 season, which was a marginal improvement above the €400 million deficit for the 2020–2021 season (Deloitte and Touche 2001).

The significance of the sport is supported by this kind of value creation, which goes beyond simple entertainment to include the creation of jobs and business opportunities (Amara et al., 2015). Value is a dynamic concept that is created via the participation of numerous stakeholders in an event (Figure 1). The football industry has an effect on urban development and makes a significant contribution to the socio-economic fabric of a city or even a nation. It appears that it can encourage large investments in infrastructure, grow the tourism industry, and generate large numbers of jobs in related businesses like broadcasting, hotel, merchandising, and transportation, both directly and indirectly (Matheson, 2012).

Figure 1: Value Co-Creation Process

Value

Product

Football Club | Contribution → Event ← Contribution | Stakeholders

Service

Value
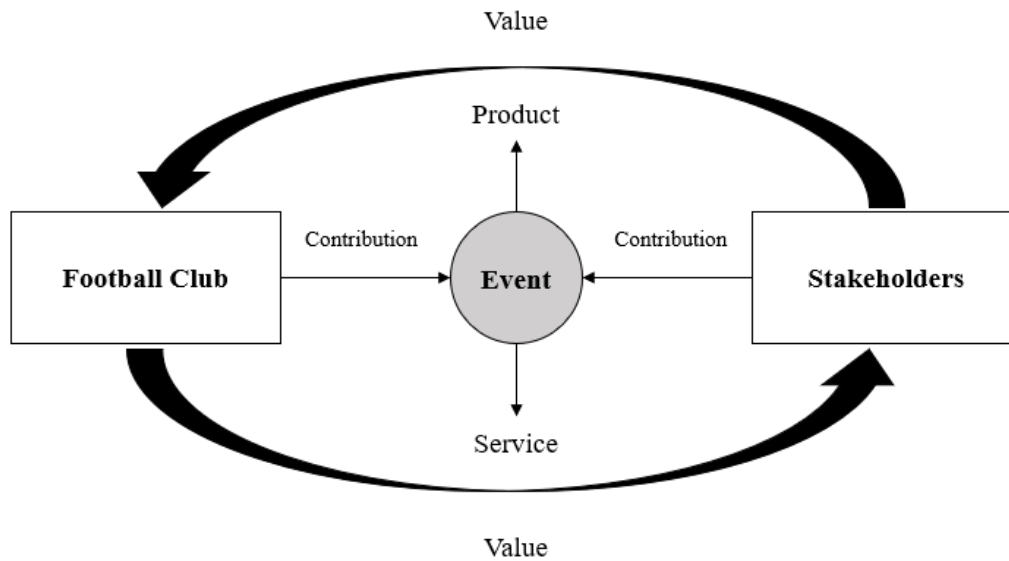
*Source: Yiapanas and Thrassou*

However, it's crucial to note that the growth of the football industry is not without challenges. The escalating cost of maintaining competitive teams in terms of exorbitant player wages and ever-increasing transfer fees has brought to the fore concerns regarding financial sustainability and sparked debates about financial inequalities within the sport.

Focus must be directed against the widening financial gap that separates elite teams with substantial wealth from lesser teams that are fighting for survival and is distorting the competitive environment (Preuss et al., 2014). Furthermore, social structures and cultural values are affected by the football industry in both positive and negative ways. The norms around gender roles, community involvement, identity, and youth development are all significantly impacted by sports. Football is a powerful socialization tool that promotes community building, social integration, and cross-cultural interaction (Guttmann, 2002).

Indeed, the wave of globalization sweeping through the football industry, coupled with its associated commercial expansion, signals clear opportunities for further growth. Undeniably, though, this growth is not without its share of complexities — financial, social, and beyond. It is highly crucial that academicians, policymakers, industry stakeholders, and society at large pay concerted attention towards understanding and navigating football's comprehensive growth trajectory and multifaceted influences.

All particularisms become relativized as a result of Globalization, which forces the proponents of particular identities or views to interact with and respond to other particularistic identities, concept, and social processes in the universal sphere. As a result, despite their seeming categorical antinomies, universalism and particularism are intertwined and part of a global network (Robertson, 1992).

The "particularization of universalism", on the other hand, emerged when the world gained "socio-political concreteness". This creates vast political networks of worldwide interconnectedness and functions to organize countries, for instance, according to their own constitutional frameworks, calendars, and locations within global time zones. In the framework of global football contests or other cultural events, every member of a society, regardless of ethnicity, is expected to identify with a particular national team. At large international games, thousands of different supporter groups mix together, and each nation displays distinct types of dress, song, and music in addition to distinct behavioral patterns (such as in their dealing with the local population, other supporter groups, and the various security agencies). The global game becomes the "glocal game" as a result of cultural relativization.

The universalism-particularism relationship is based on interdependent cultural processes, yet misplaced fears that the "global" is replacing or manipulating the "local" are sparked by the social consciousness of globalization (Giulianotti, 2004).

The concept of "glocalization" aids in the explanation of how specific cultural context affects how the local and global symbiosis varies. Although the concept "glocalization" seems to have originated in Japanese corporate operations, it may be claimed that *"the projects of glocalization are the constitutive aspects of con-temporary globalization"* when used to explain larger cultural goals (Robertson, 1995). For instance, glocalization occurs in the sports media when international events, like the World Cup finals, are framed or interpreted using local terminology and points of reference, such as the ongoing discussion of national players or issues. Subtly, glocalization can be seen in the cultural variations in televised football commentating conventions, camera angles, and production techniques

It is noteworthy that several forms of cultural glocalization have coincided with football's global proliferation (White, 2004).

First, when football was first introduced, under more severe conditions, certain civilizations either rejected it or drastically changed its regulations. Local elites in the Asian subcontinent favored high-contact sports like rugby or football over cricket and hockey. The Australians created Australian Rules football to suit local conditions and the fitness requirements of cricket players during the winter. Later, American colleges adopted rugby over association football to create "gridiron".

Second, after football had a more positive cultural response, it was glocalized through a process known as the "universalization of particularism". Football's universal principles allowed particular local cultures to create their own unique "traditions", which are exemplified by unique physical strategies, playing philosophies, aesthetic standards, organizational frameworks, and interpretive vocabularies. Third, when several regulatory bodies and international competitions were formed during the 1920s and 1960s, universalism became more particularized and contributed to the glocalization of football.

Fourth, since the late 1960s, increased flows have influenced glocalization; in football, this includes the cross-border movement of labor, capital, information, and goods that support non-national forms of cultural particularity. Particular football countries or continents no longer differ as much tactically and aesthetically, yet nations still find it difficult to relativize themselves through competitive achievement. Spectator cultures have a greater responsibility to "represent" the country or the area to a worldwide audience by enacting particularistic symbols in songs, costumes, and flags. Yet football also has a global, cosmopolitan fan base of supporters that "relativize" themselves into particular cross-national inclinations for international players, coaches, and teams (Sassen, 1999).

Here, it's crucial to highlight the major role that telecom and media businesses have played in the modern globalization of football. Global cartels comprising satellite, cable, and free-to-air broadcasters have surfaced to disseminate football pictures worldwide, making the game a crucial component of popular culture's "banal cosmopolitanism" (Billing 1995).

Football's economic spheres have always been a manifestation of modern glocalization processes. The various corporate arrangements of clubs within particular countries have extensive histories of "glocalization" in the business structure of football.

In the UK, teams were often set up as "limited companies", but in the 1990s, the top teams sought to go public on the stock market. Clubs are typically held by members (commonly referred to as socios) and governed by elected governors in South America, Europe, and until recently Spain.

The majority of Italian clubs are still owned by wealthy local industrialists, but since the early 1980s, emerging owners have had the choice to either become involved in new industries like Berlusconi at the Milan club or control parent companies like the heavily indebted Cirio at Lazio and the now bankrupt Parmalat at Parma.

Various "transnational corporations" (TNCs) are the most active players in football's modern glocalization. These include major football clubs, media complexes like BSkyB and its sibling firms, and merchandising giants like Nike.

NCs are equipped with global infrastructures to produce, distribute, and promote sports-related products including sports DVDs, gear, and kits. It goes without saying that a sportswear company such as Nike sells more football jerseys in England that are approved by neighborhood teams than basketball shirts worn by American teams. From the business's point of view, these statistics show how "micro-marketing" or "glocalization" of sporting goods functions by appealing to specific client cultures through the use of regional symbols and advertising discourses (Robertson, 1992).

International fan bases and goods buyers for transnational teams like Manchester United, Juventus, and Bayern Munich are comparable in size to national populations, if not in terms of identity patterns. These clubs draw attention to the deterritorialized forms of glocality that can emerge among global groups of pop culture enthusiasts. Because these football communities are created by the voluntary identification of people with club-related symbols and rituals as well as the worldwide dissemination of club-focused imagery and products, we refer to them as "self-invented virtual diasporas".


### 2.1.3. The role of informal Norms in football

Clarifying a broad concept like "norm" is necessary before talking about norms in sports. In broadest terms, "norm" refers to the typical behavior of specific individuals in specific circumstances over a specific time period. Norms can be created formally or informally:

"Informal norms" are norms that frequently impact behavior but are not officially established by a legal body. Often are based on commonly accepted beliefs about what people should behave, such as customs, traditions, and behavioral standards, and often contain social or moral punishments (Posner,1997). Since they are maintained "by the acceptance or disapproval of other members in the group or society," they are referred to as "informal," which literally translates to "Not done or manufactured according to a regular or specified form" (Onions, 1973).

Conversely, "formal norms" are "ultimately enforced by the legal system's organizations" (Dequech, 2009). However, it should be highlighted that the term "formal" has a broader definition than "legal." It invokes a generic class that is not simply reducible to law that illustrates this idea when applied to standards (Fiori, 2018).

The unwritten regulations, traditions and cultural elements of football are represented by informal norms, which are important as they influence behavior and practices within the game. Although not legally established, these norms have an impact on the behavior of players, fans, club administration and other members of the football community. The social dynamics of fan behavior also heavily depend on the role of informal norms. Long-standing cultural customs are frequently the source of the fervor, devotion, and allegiance that supporters exhibit toward their clubs and national teams.

Researchers have examined and categorized sports fans' degree of attachment or devotion to their team and sport. Within a club's network, fans are significantly more significant than any other stakeholder since they have the power to create value by influencing the social aspects of the club (Zagnoli and Radicchi 2010). The bond that unites fans and their team has been defined as loyalty, commitment, loyalty and pride (Tapp 2004).

Football nowadays can be experienced in various ways besides the traditional attendance at matches, to which fans cannot be less loyal, even if they do not physically attend a match. A fan's motivation leads to match attendance, loyalty to their club and the development of loyalty. Physical presence at the stadium and also watching the match on television or via the Internet are different forms of sports consumption and evidence of behavioral loyalty (Wann et al. 2001; Bauer et al. 2008).

There are several factors that determine fans' participation and increased involvement in activities and are related to their desire to gain benefits such as group affiliation, entertainment and improved self-esteem (James and Ross 2004; Pritchard et al. 2009). Participation can lead to feelings similar to those of a political rally or a religious gathering (Pritchard and Funk 2010).

Furthermore, informal norms make possible the development of governance and the functioning of football clubs themselves. The cultural value of a club and its supporting community can definitely influence its policies and business practices.

Football culture spreads not only on the pitch, conditioning clubs but also influencing informal norms, values and traditions. The cultural value of football in fact manifests itself through fan identity, community unity and the global exaltation of the sport. These cultural components have developed together with the sport over time and are intertwined with its history. Football unites people from different countries, socioeconomic classes, and cultural backgrounds because it has a universal language. Regardless of language or country, a shared passion for football brings people from all over the world together. Football's capacity to bridge cultural divides is among its most admirable qualities. Nationalities and cultural differences are subordinated to the common passion of a game while one is participating or watching it. People from all social classes can come together through football's special power. In this sense, teams frequently include players from many origins, embracing people of various racial backgrounds, religious beliefs, and ethnicities and demonstrating the beauty of peaceful cooperation. This serves as a vehicle for cultural interchange as well because it gives spectators and athletes alike the chance to become familiar with one another's cultures. This conversation challenges cultural prejudices and aims to foster mutual understanding and respect.

(Jones, 2023). The spectacle of fans cheering side by side, waving the flags of different nations, is a testimony to the unifying power of this beautiful game. Cheering for a football team becomes part of a person's identity and is passed on from generation to generation. The colors, chants and rituals

associated with a team become symbols of pride and belonging. The stadium, during football matches, becomes a theatre for displaying one's city and national heritage: fans proudly wear their team colors, wave flags and display their cultural traditions. Finally, informal norms, despite not being regarded as official or legal, have an important bearing on the ethical conduct of those who play the sport. These norms are related to the common expectation of fairness, such as fair play, integrity and mutual respect, and are intended as a moral guide for players, coaches, managers and fans. Fair is the term that describes the just, respectable and honest, hence 'fairness' also means justice, honesty and loyalty as implied meanings (Thomas, 2023). With the development of sport in the 19th century, the term 'fair play' was soon accepted and used as an ethical concept, to describe correct behavior according to certain principles. This concept represents the essence of the sporting spirit and is manifested through respect for rules, honesty and sportsmanship towards opponents on the field. Although there are official rules that promote fair play, it is the informal rules that reinforce these practices, thus creating a condition in which misbehavior is generally discouraged. Fair play must be regarded as a prerogative of sports ethics and fairness as a fundamental principle of sport. Fairness must not be graded and must not come from specific conditions in limited areas of sport, and a devaluation to the lowest common denominator must not be taken into account (Pilz, 1988). Equity in all circumstances of life, together with sport as a driving force of awareness, is a far-reaching goal. Football, and all sport in general, without fairness would be deprived of its most important values and thus of its identity (CISM, 1995).

Informal norms are important means that support ethical conduct in football. They create a code of conduct that does not follow the written rules but is essential to preserve the spirit of the game clean and proper. Therefore, to safeguard the integrity of football, the entire football community must continue to nurture and strengthen these informal ethical norms (Lever, 2017)

## 2.2. Sustainability

### 2.2.1. Definition and History of Sustainability

Since its introduction, sustainability has been a critical concept, and its definition attracts the attention of various disciplines. If we wanted to analyze the etymology of the term, the word sustainability

derives from the latin "sustinere", which means to support, defend, conserve and/or take care of. In the academic literature, there are a growing number of definitions, and this reflects the multitude of ways in which the concept of sustainability is used (Cheney, Nheu, and Vecellio, 2004). Brundtland's definition of sustainability is often the starting point. Specifically, in 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development published The Report "Our Common Future" (Brundtland Report), defining the concept of sustainable development as "...*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs…*" (WCED, 1987). As can be seen, in this report they talked about "Sustainable Development", yet this is often associated with the notion of sustainability. In fact, in academic and scientific fields, the two terms are used as synonyms (Olawumi and Chan, 2018). By the 1960s, it had become apparent that a new developmental paradigm was necessary. Compelling evidence was emerging about negative environmental impacts of the Green Revolution in agriculture, industrial pollution and urban growth. These developments seriously questioned the viability of continuing the global development strategy based only on economic growth. Consequently, it was clear that a new approach towards global development was required. These occurrences have seriously challenged the possibility of continuing the global development strategy based solely on economic growth. Following the 1987 Report, most of the international community took the statement as the new paradigm for development (Gore, 2015).

Another significant milestone occurred in 1992, when the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development[1], also known as the "Earth Summit", was held. On this occasion, for the first time the topic of emerging environmental problems was addressed at a global level. The event led to greater awareness of the need for a balance between economic development and environmental protection. Furthermore, a new definition of the concept of sustainability was given, seen as "*a development capable of ensuring the satisfaction of the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibility of future generations to realize their own*" (Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992). A key outcome of the Summit was the creation of Agenda 21, a comprehensive action plan that called for a commitment from all countries to solve socio-environmental problems. This was a series of recommendations to promote sustainable development at local, national and global levels. In fact, it starts from the premise that human societies cannot continue to pursue the path followed so far as it has increased and is continuing to do so, the economic gap both between the various countries and between the different population groups within the same

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[1] Representatives of the governments of 178 countries, more than 100 heads of state and over 1000 non-governmental organizations participated at the Conference.

nations (Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, 1992). These events are just the beginning of what is now a global commitment: since the 1990s there have been numerous conferences with the aim of establishing which sustainability practices to implement. Ten years later, in 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development was held in Johannesburg which was an opportunity to reflect on what began at the Rio Summit and to achieve the objectives of sustainable development. In particular, the objective was also to examine the progress made in terms of environmental protection and to establish regulations aimed at improving the quality of life while respecting the environment. This with the final objective of strengthening the link between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability (World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002). In 2012, exactly twenty years after the historic Earth Summit in Rio, the conference known as "Rio+20" took place. This event had the precise objective of revitalizing political commitment to sustainable development and examining the status of previously undertaken international promises.

In 2015, the United Nations adopted a new strategic framework - the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The document is the result of an articulated and complex process, which lasted almost three years. This process began with the World Conference on Sustainable Development, known as "Rio+20", and evolved within the discussion on how to continue the path started with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), whose deadline was set for 2015. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development represents an action agenda for people, planet and prosperity. The governments of the 193 member countries of the United Nations signed the latter on September 25, 2015, which was subsequently endorsed by the UN General Assembly. With this occasion, 17 Sustainable Development Goals - known as Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs - were outlined. The 2030 Agenda takes this name because these 17 goals and more broadly the entire action agenda consisting of 169 targets are to be achieved by 2030 (2030 agenda, 2015). In the figure below (Figure 2) there can be seen specifically what these goals are, one by one. These can be subsumed into 3 major dimensions of sustainable development - namely, the economic, social, and ecological dimensions. What the SDGs aim for is to fight against inequality, end poverty, combat climate change, and finally to build peaceful societies that respect human rights (United Nations, 2024).

Figure 2: Sustainable Development Goals

What most connotes the 2030 Agenda is that its goals have not been set for individual countries, but on the contrary have global validity by involving all countries and consequently all actors in societies. Therefore, it is referred to as "inclusiveness and universality"; in fact, no matter the level of development of the individual country, the achievement of the SDGs requires participation, but above all, collaboration among all member states. It is possible to understand, therefore, how this event marked a significant milestone in global efforts to address urgent problems such as climate change, inequality, and environmental degradation (United Nations, 2024).

### 2.2.1.1. The tree dimensions: environmental, social, and economic

In many instances, it is still unclear how social, economic, and ecological sustainability are related to one another. The three dimensions are frequently assigned varying degrees of importance and are arranged relatively adjacent to one another without being combined into a cohesive whole.

This could be due in part to the expectation that this idea will be able to reconcile social justice and environmental conservation, which is obviously very difficult to do both theoretically and practically: "A contested discursive arena that allows for the articulation of political and economic contrasts between North and South and introduces social justice and political engagement to environmental challenges is maybe the best way to characterize sustainable development" (Becker, 1999).

The environmental dimension emphasizes the imperative for environmental protection and resource conservation aimed at preserving the planet's health, biodiversity, and overall sustainability. "Maintenance of natural capital" is the definition of environmental sustainability, which forms the input/output rules (Goodland, 1995):

- Output rule: Trash emissions from a project or action under consideration should not be more than what the local ecosystem can handle without unacceptably compromising its capability to absorb more waste in the future or other essential functions.

- Input rule:
    - Renewables: Harvest rates for inputs from renewable resources should be within the natural system's capacity for regeneration.
    - Non-Renewables: The rate at which nonrenewable resource inputs deplete should be less than the rate at which human ingenuity and investment produce renewable equivalents.

The source and sink functions two essential environmental services must continue to exist unhindered during the time when sustainability is needed (Daly, 1988).

The word "ES" refers to a set of restrictions imposed on the four primary activities that determine the growth of the human economic subsystem: the use of both renewable and nonrenewable resources on the source side and pollution and waste assimilation on the sink side.

It seems that this description will hold true in the future for any country, sector of the economy, or age, but each will require a unique approach to sustainability. There are disparities in the relative importance of input and output in achieving ES, even though all countries are required to follow the input/output regulations. For instance, certain nations or regions, like the former centrally planned economies, must focus more on reducing pollution; others, like the countries that export tropical timber, must focus more on bringing the harvest rates of their renewable resources down to regeneration rates; still others, like the OECD countries, must reduce their per capita consumption (Goodland, 1995). Authors such as Goodland (1995) and Victor (1991) have extensively explored this dimension. Goodland argues for the need to maintain "*the rates of renewable resource harvest should not exceed regeneration…*" and Victor notes the importance of reducing environmental risks linked to the over utilization of resources in his work.

A review of a few national and international social sustainability concepts reveals that the selection of indicators is often based more on current political objectives and practical grasp of plausibility

than it is on theoretical foundations (Grießler & Littig, 2004). This is also because social sustainability still lacks a well-defined theoretical framework. Many of these ideas might stay implicit because they are somewhat hidden by an apparently arbitrary selection of typical socio-political indicators. Additionally, they have diverse definitions of social sustainability (social standards, institutional sustainability, democratic rights). The conceptualization of social sustainability is complicated by the fact that people may value one over the other and that the political, normative, and analytical components are not clearly distinguished from one another. The word "social" has a wide and complex definition that encompasses both normative and analytical aspects, which contributes to the issue at hand. Development must take into account its natural conditions in order to be sustainable, as it is inextricably linked to their reproduction. To meet the standards set by the natural sciences, an analysis of the social processes that impact a society's relationships and interactions with "nature" is also necessary: *How can societies assure the prospects for future generations' development by regulating and modifying their procedures and structures?*

The interaction between the social and ecological systems is known as sustainability, and it needs to be planned in a way that prevents the system from becoming unstable overall (Brandl, 2002). The examination of social structures and mechanisms that affect the metabolic link between nature and society should be made easier by this analytical facet of social sustainability (Fischer-Kowalski, 1997).

Social Sustainability is also a normative concept, since the concept of sustainability includes three fundamental normative social principles: everyone has the right to live a decent life, social justice (intergenerational, intragenerational, and international), and participation of all relevant stakeholders. Beyond attempting to provide the most fundamental human requirements, social sustainability is more than just a minimum floor of social rights. Societies are characterized by their social sustainability. It represents ties inside society as well as those between nature and civilization, as mediated by employment. Social sustainability is achieved when a society's activities and the institutional framework that supports them meet a wide range of human needs, are shaped to protect nature and its capacity for reproduction over time, and uphold the normative claims of social justice, human dignity, and participation (UNCED, 1992).

The social dimension regards equality, equity, human wellbeing and social cohesion, with several scholars underlining its importance in the face of sustainable development. For instance, Sen (1999) elucidates the significant role human capabilities play in social and economic development. Other contributors such as Sachs (2015) emphasize issues like poverty eradication, gender equality, education and justice, underpinning the importance of universal social inclusion.

Finally, the economic dimension stresses the necessity for economic growth, stability and sustainability as an integral aspect of sustainable development. According to Stiglitz et al. (2010), achieving economic sustained growth requires a diligent approach towards macroeconomic management to ensure equitable wealth distribution. Elkington (1997) expands this dimension to include businesses which should focus not only on profit-making but also on the social and environmental implications of their functions, a concept known as the triple bottom line. The phrase "economic sustainability" refers to policies meant to promote the long-term economic development of a nation or business while also managing the effects of its operations on the environment, society, and culture. It involves finding a balance between economic growth and profit-making, as well as the effects on people and the environment. In economic contexts, it is frequently believed that sustainability is attained when society's well-being is sustained throughout time (Arrow, 2004). In certain cases, long-term prosperity can come from maintaining all of the capital. To put it another way, the depletion of natural resources can be avoided by making investments in industrial capital or other types of capital. Over time, the maximum level of constant consumption per person can be attained by maintaining the level of productive capital (Solow, 1974). Similarly J. Hartwick proposed a rule about the maintenance of total capital that, if all renters use their resources to invest in replicable capital consumption does not decrease over time . These "rules", however, demand that various types of capital be near, if not exact, equivalents. Sustainability can be attained in this situation, when well-being is at least maintained across time, by protecting the entire capital (Hartwick, 1977).

Capital is commonly understood to be a "productive" base that offers chances to gain a range of things.  It consists of all created capital assets inside the society. According to this understanding of sustainability, natural capital can run out as long as the business makes investments in alternative sources of capital to make up for the loss and prevent the overall capital from declining over time.

The degree of wellbeing that is deemed sustainable is another important aspect of sustainability. The "well-being maintenance" sustainability criterion is concerned with how well-being evolves over time rather than whether or not the highest level of well-being is attained at any given time (Krstic, 2018).

A more comprehensive and significant understanding of sustainability also calls for the efficient use and deployment of resources across time, ensuring that production is conducted at the lowest possible cost and that resources are allocated to the areas that yield the most advantages (Ilic, 2018).

When it comes to economic efficiency, economic sustainability may be defined as the process of allocating savings and investment across time in a way that maximizes well-being for both the current and future generations (Stavins, 2003).

In conclusion, striking a workable balance between the environmental, social, and economic aspects is necessary to achieve sustainable development (Figure 3).

Figure 3: The tree dimensions of Sustainability
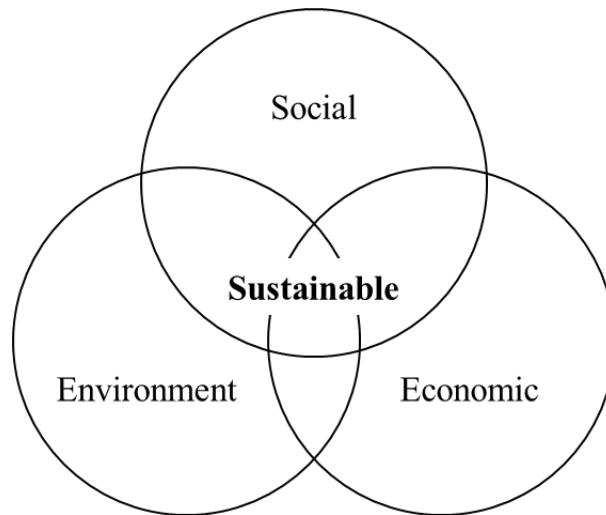
Because of the interdependence of various components, a complex system must be carefully navigated to reach the intended sustainable state.

### 2.2.3. Regulatory frameworks: Formal Norms

In Europe, the regulatory framework around sustainability is very complex and encompasses a range of laws and directives that aim to achieve a more sustainable future. This commitment is reflected in the fact that these normative framings are deeply embedded in the legal and institutional structures of the EU, making sustainability a key pillar of the European strategy.

In 2019, the European Commission issued the "Reflection Document towards a sustainable Europe by 2030" in order to make the entire continent grasp the fundamental importance of this issue; in fact it opened with the following statement "*Sustainable development is a complex issue, but it is a simple concept: Making sure that our economic growth allows us to maintain a pattern that delivers equitable outcomes for all humanity, and ensuring that human beings do not consume more resources than the Earth can provide*" (European Commission, 2019). All this translates into a commitment with the need to modernize the economy through various actions including correcting the current

imbalances in the food system, making production and consumption patterns more sustainable, and also bringing building design and the mobility scheme onto a more sustainable track. The purpose of this document is not only to invite reflection, but rather to decide on the concrete way through which the goal can be achieved; in fact, it is necessary for all EU actors to make the transition to sustainability their priority. However, the basic prerequisite for achieving the SDGs and referred to by the European Commission is the creation of coherence between the different agendas of member countries (European Commission, 2019). Finally, the European Commission cites training, education and learning as indispensable elements in creating a culture of sustainability.

In addition to the SDGs, at the forefront of European legal frameworks is the "Green Deal" - a set of policy initiatives proposed by the European Commission to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To date, while it is true that climate change is posing one of the greatest challenges ever, it also presents an opportunity to build a new economic model, and the Green Deal has set out what is the way to achieve this fundamental transformation. The latter sets ambitious targets, chief among them to reduce emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030, and thanks to the "Ready for 55%" legislative package it will be possible to do so equally among all member states (European Commission, 2019). Second pillar of this agreement concerns mobility, and specifically with the new regulations issued on CO2 emissions, all cars will be zero-emission by 2035. Also, connected to this goal, is the fact that from 2027 emissions trading will be applied to road transport, so as to establish a price to pollution and consequently to incentivize the use of cleaner fuels (European Commission, 2019). Another decisive step has been marked by 2021, when the commission revised the EU Directive on Energy Performance of Buildings with the aim of reducing resources and consumption in buildings. In particular, the commission aims to double renovation rates over the next 10 years. To give a more comprehensive picture of what the Green Deal represents, Figure 4 summarizes its main elements.

Figure 4: The European Green Deal
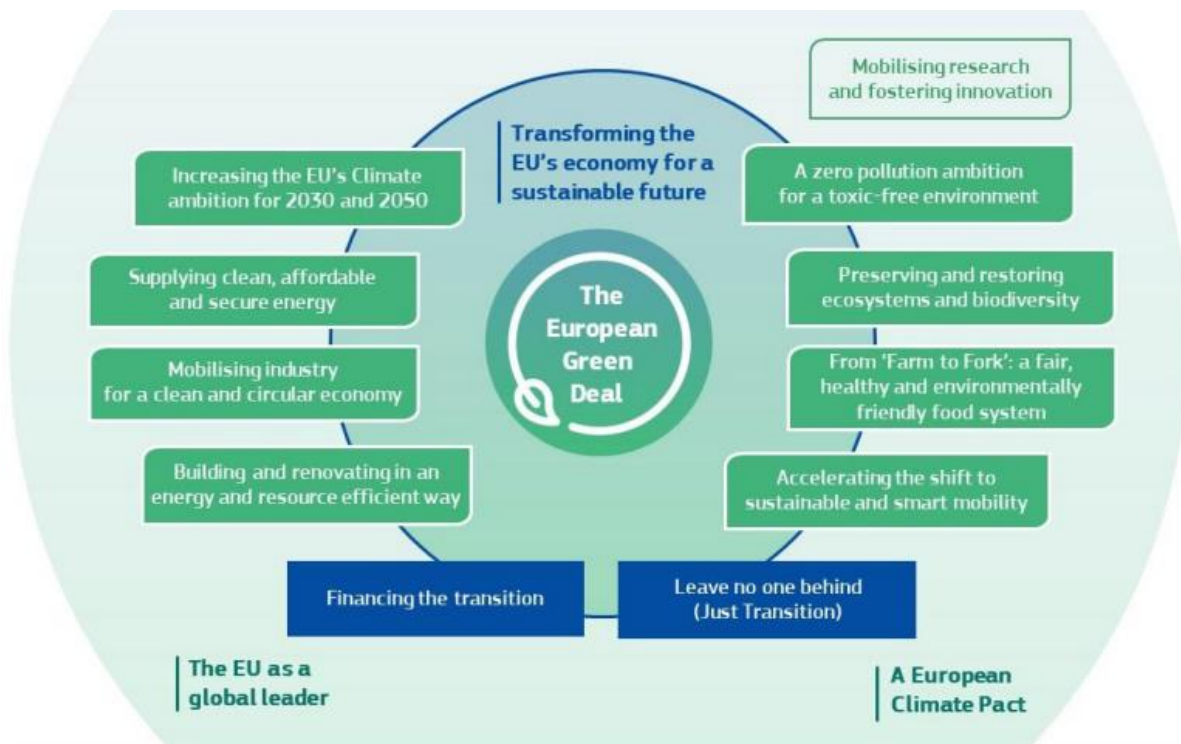
*Source: European Commission*

The integration of sustainability into the European regulatory fabric is further highlighted by the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (NFRD), which requires large companies[2] to disclose information about their environmental, social and economic impacts. The revision of the regulations regarding financial statements had a twofold objective; first, to strengthen the basis for sustainable investments, and second, to increase transparency and accountability by encouraging companies to adopt increasingly sustainable practices (European Commission, 2014). Specifically, what the non-financial statement must include is the quantification of all those elements related to sustainability, such as emissions, energy, human rights, circular economy, and so on. The importance of sustainability is growing so much that in December 2022 the European Union issued a new directive - the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), an evolution of the NFRD just seen. This directive requires 50,000 companies (and progressively more organizations) to report on their sustainability performance more than any other legislation to date. Specifically, these entities are required to publish their first report in 2025, which will cover the financial year 2024 with an emphasis on ESG issues - that is, related environmental, social, and governance impacts (European Union, 2022). The goal of

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[2] The term "large enterprises" also includes insurance companies and banks.

this new directive is to promote a change in business conduct in order to manage financial and sustainability performance in parallel.

In conclusion, the European Commission said there will undoubtedly be challenges ahead as differences in economic conditions or national capacities could lead to disparities in efficiency. But this is precisely where it will intervene; in fact, its role goes far beyond simply drafting rules and policies, providing support to member states that need it. A further challenge is to continually adapt regulatory frameworks to respond promptly to emerging needs. Nonetheless, the European Commission wanted to close the discussion paper with an important message - "*Europe has all the attributes needed to meet the greatest of challenges. Together, we can succeed*" (European Commission, 2021).

## 2.3. Relationship between Football and Sustainability

### 2.3.1. In-depth examination of the importance of Sustainability in the context of Modern Football

So far, we have seen how football is the most watched sport in the world, however it is not only a sport with a following of billions of fans around the world, it is also a field that has a significant social and environmental impact (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), 2001). Hence the importance of integrating sustainability into these two dimensions in order to achieve medium to long term benefits, benefits that go beyond those generated on the pitch.

In this context, when we talk about "social sustainability" we mean inclusiveness, promotion of health and well-being and ultimately community engagement. In the last 10 years, there has been a growing attention towards the world of sport, and football in particular since, due to its popularity, values and goals, plays a crucial role in promoting social cohesion, strengthening communities and more broadly towards society as a whole (Collins et al., 1999). In fact, to date, several projects have been developed with the aim of leveraging sport as a means to achieve social objectives. The applications of sport for societal benefit are numerous: it is employed to steer young people away from crime or antisocial behavior, to engage them in formal and informal education activities, and to advocate for healthier lifestyles (Tacon, 2007). Beyond these uses, organizations around the globe are harnessing the universal appeal of football to foster a climate of social change within their local communities. Concrete evidence of this can be seen in initiatives pursued by football organizations such as FIFA's Football for Hope and UEFA's Foundation for Children.

FIFA[3] itself stated "*We are committed to Football for Hope because we are committed to society*". Although this association has long supported programs for human and social development, it only began doing so in 2005 when the FIFA Congress decided to add a new pillar to the organization's goal - namely "building a better future" - that social responsibility assumed an even greater and increasingly crucial role. Indeed, since then there has been a paradigm shift: development cooperation has evolved from "charitable giving" to "socially responsible, involved, and committed." (Football for Hope, 2008). In the figure below (Figure 4) we can see a brief graphical explanation of what the "Football for Hope" project specifically is. With football as a key tool in the areas of health promotion, peace building, children's rights and education, anti-discrimination & social integration, and environment, it consists of a strategic alliance between streetfootballworld and FIFA with the goal of establishing a quality standard for sustainable social and human development programs. This will support best practices in the field. These programmes must have two requirements: the first is that they must target children and youth; the second is that they must leverage football in order to promote dialogue and participation. FIFA itself stated "*We at FIFA see our duty as being to lead a concrete and positive contribution to Sustainable Development through Football*", in fact this movement was born to fully harness the power of football to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) defined by the United Nations (Football for Hope, 2008). In short, the "Football for Hope" movement is a bridge between development and football. This movement is part of an even bigger project of FIFA, namely, to allocate at least 0.7 per cent of its total revenues to its CSR initiatives. In addition, a further action promoted by the association is to use its major competitions - such as the FIFA World Cup™ - as platforms for awareness and fundraising campaigns (Football for Hope, 2008).

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[3] FIFA stands for *"Fédération Internationale de Football Association"*

Figure 4: Football for Hope
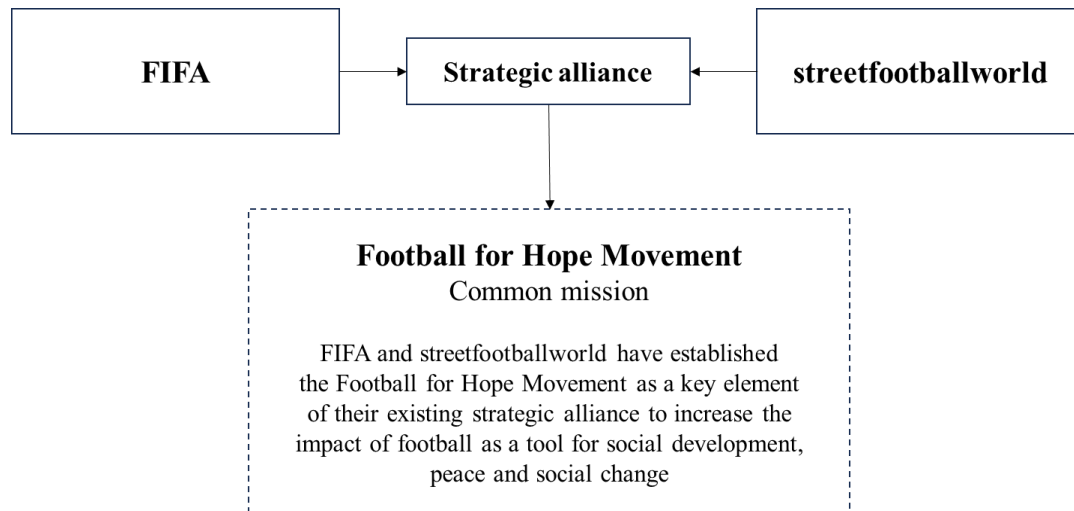


*Source: FIFA*

Secondly, there is the UEFA Foundation for Children, another remarkable initiative in this field. In 2014, the president proposed the establishment of the Foundation for Children with the desire to play a more active role in society, stating "*The UEFA Foundation will help us to preserve the magic of football and give hope to the children who need it most. This is truly a great project and a cause that is particularly close to my heart*" (Platini, 2014); this proposal was accepted by the UEFA Congress. Specifically, this foundation supports humanitarian projects that promote children's rights in the following areas: education, access to sport, health, protection of children's rights, integration of minorities, and personal development (UEFA Foundation for Children, 2024). To date, 412 projects have been carried out, 133 of which are currently running, and all are rooted in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as can be seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Project Icons

**Access to sport: SDGs 3·5**
The right to play and engage in recreational activities

**Personal development: SDGs 3·4·5**
The right to education, to express one's opinions freely, to participate in cultural and artistic life

**Disabled children: SDGs 3·4**
The right to special care and to live a full and decent life

**Conflict victims: SDGs 3·4·5·16**
Protecting against all forms of violence, supporting refugee children, protecting children in detention, providing protection during armed conflict

**Gender equality: SDGs 5·8·10**
Girls' empowerment, protecting against all forms of gender discrimination, sexual violence and exploitation

**Employability: SDGs 1·4·5·8·10**
Protecting children against economic exploitation and any work likely to compromise their health or education, providing training and support when looking for work

**Healthy lifestyle: SDG 3**
Promoting exercise and a healthy diet

**Environmental protection: SDGs 4·5·13·15**
Raising awareness among children about the protection and restoration of our ecosystem

**Strengthening partnerships: SDGs 16·17**
Promoting a peaceful and inclusive society, building partnerships for sustainable development

**Infrastructure/equipment: SDG 9**
Providing the sports equipment and safe infrastructure needed to ensure the right to play and engage in recreational activities

*Source: UEFA Activity Report 2022/2023*

From an environmental point of view, the impact of the football sector is considerable, as it consumes enormous amounts of energy on the one hand and generates a large volume of waste on the other (Collins et al., 2009). Football clubs and stadium operators have gradually become aware of this and recognized their environmental responsibilities. Consequently, in line with the approach of other industries, sports organizations have made a voluntary commitment to environmental sustainability ( Greenhalgh, LeCrom, and Dwyer, 2015). One of the main areas of action is to reduce the use of plastic at events. Indeed, when thousands of fans gather in stadiums, the presence of waste such as bags, bottles, straws, envelopes etc. is inevitable and according to the UN, most of the waste generated is single-use plastics, 50% of which end up in the oceans. A highly relevant example in this respect is the 'Sky Ocean Rescue' initiative realized in cooperation between Sky and the Premier League. The aim is twofold: on the one hand to help British clubs phase out the use of plastic in their stadiums, and to do this they will be supported by the expert team 'Sky Ocean Rescue Ninjas'; on the other hand, it aims to raise awareness of positive environmental actions among fans worldwide. These are small changes, but if implemented together they will have a big impact (Premier League, 2018). However, this is just one of many examples, as many clubs have introduced policies to combat this problem by replacing single-use plastic with more sustainable alternatives, such as biodegradable cups and refillable water bottles. A further point of attention concerns energy consumption, to the extent that clubs are actively working to minimize the latter. In Italy, one of the biggest initiatives has

to be attributed to Udinese, which thanks to its partnership with Bluenergy Group[4] will be the first zero-impact stadium. This will be made possible by powering the Dacia Arena with green electricity (from 100% renewable energy sources) and zero-impact natural gas ($CO_2$ Free[5]). In addition, this partnership initiated a further energy qualification project in order to make the Dacia Arena a zero environmental impact facility. Initially, actions were taken to make the heating of the stadium more efficient, followed by a series of interventions to minimize consumption in general (Udinese Calcio, 2020).

In conclusion, it is evident that football teams' dedication to environmental sustainability is an indication of the sport's expanding global importance in encouraging sustainable practices and environmental awareness.

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[4] Bluenergy Group is a leading player in Northern Italy for the supply of electricity, gas and services to homes and businesses.

[5] Because of the Friulian multiutility's commitment to the Carbonsink project, an Italian business that works with climate change mitigation, all Bluenergy supplies will be "$CO_2$ free". In particular, businesses can voluntarily offset those emissions that cannot be lowered by using the carbon credit method.

## 2.3.2. The Ways UEFA Sustain the Football Community

The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) has taken, and continues to take, great strides to foster sustainability within the world of football, based on a holistic approach considering the social, environmental and economic aspects. UEFA's commitment to ensuring sustainability is significant as it promotes social integration, economic sustainability and the use of green management practices in football operations. In December 2021, it announced the launch of its innovative Football Sustainability Strategy 'Strength through Unity'. This began as a long-term project for Europe's top football body that aims to inspire, activate and accelerate action by all football stakeholders towards respect for human rights and respect for the environment in European football until 2030. The name of this strategy is meant to reflect precisely the concept of collaboration, i.e. that the goals guiding this plan can only be addressed and resolved through the joint work of the stakeholders in this sector. In concrete terms, in order to ensure that this 'common work' is achieved, a shared agenda has been put in place, a coherent approach has been developed among all, and above all a common language has been adopted, as communication is the fundamental pillar on which to build. The strategy was developed by linking football to sustainability and adapted to the principles of UEFA and the demands of global institutions and civil society. UEFA realized that implementing sustainability in the world of sport requires the right balance of socially responsible and environmentally friendly actions to ensure the long-term viability of football.

Responsibility' is one of the pillars of the "Strength through Unity" programme and is analysed in the division called "Together for the Future of Football". It aims to provide all players with a football that is reliable, responsible and engaging, recognizing UEFA's duty to more effectively promote the development of sustainability and to act more forcefully for the climate. This desire is also reflected in the stakeholders of the European Football Council, who want to create a better near future for football, striving to increase the positive aspects of the game, while trying to eliminate the negative ones. Analyzing the concrete actions taken, UEFA, in all its events, has committed to reducing waste and improving the life cycle of products used, such as food, packaging and waste, by adopting the '4R approach' (reduce, reuse, recycle and recover) to greatly minimize the impact of the game of football on the environment, and save as much as possible on costs. The European Football Association also wants to address the reduction of European football's carbon footprint, with the intention of becoming a reference point for all organizations, trying to reduce, but also prevent, the decay of the ecosystem caused by the world of football, and using its visibility to incentivize the whole community to take urgent action. UEFA's idea is to organize every football event in a carbon-neutral manner to safeguard host cities and their communities, creating a benchmark for other events to follow. European football should consist of environmentally friendly infrastructures, providing

long-term economic and environmental benefits for society. For this reason, Europe's top football body aims to raise the standards of sustainability for all football infrastructures, in terms of design, construction, renovation and maintenance. The goal for UEFA is to make football an important medium for environmental protection by engaging society and all European governments on key issues and providing education and information to develop awareness.

The first major event that UEFA organized as a follow-up was 'UEFA EURO 2020', the European Football Championship, which was however held in 2021 due to the Covid pandemic. The event took place in 12 different European countries, generating 450,000 tons of $CO_2$ due to the constant movement of teams and fans. The governing body of European football, therefore, invested in Gold Standard-certified CO2 emission reduction projects, collaborating with South Pole, an organization that works to ensure a concrete climate commitment from companies, communities and governments. For example, among the various initiatives conceived by this organization, the most important was the planting of 600,000 trees in the 12 host cities of the tournament, which will absorb the amount of CO2 emitted during their lifetime.

Another important pillar of the 'Strength through Unity' project is social sustainability, which UEFA pursues through campaigns aimed at promoting inclusivity, diversity and equality. The first truly significant initiative was the one launched in 2012, called RESPECT, which was created to combat racism, discrimination and violence and thus promote integration in European football (UEFA, 2018). In June 2023, on the other hand, a new project called 'FootbALL' was introduced to initiate a new programme of inclusion and equal opportunities in European football through partnerships with all stakeholders, providing a socially positive change. This new programme is built on three pillars: Campaign, Platform and Activation, all of which encompass UEFA's social sustainability initiatives. The organization in fact uses football as a means to make people understand that openness and inclusiveness are the cornerstones of society and of the sport, where everyone is welcome, regardless of their background, gender or individual abilities. With this philosophy, football creates a field where everyone feels welcome, respected and on the same level, free to demonstrate their talent without discrimination.

Finally, one of UEFA's most ambitious projects is the development of financial sustainability in Europe's biggest clubs. In fact, in 2011, the Financial Fair Play was born, a programme that sets parameters to be met in economic, financial and governance terms, by European clubs in order to earn the right to compete in their national championships. With this, the European Football Council wanted to improve the economic and financial performance of clubs and protect sustainability in the medium and long term. It can indeed be considered a very good operation for our football, as the overall performance has improved considerably. In fact, practically all of the past-due loans have

been settled, and the combined net income of the European top division clubs increased from a EUR 1.7 billion deficit in 2010–11 to a EUR 579 million surplus in 2016–17. However, in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there were large losses in revenue, while fixed costs remained as before. In spite of this, the epidemic was a motivating factor in devising an even more substantial reform, which was necessary given the evolution of the football industry over the last decade. In fact, UEFA adopted the new Financial Sustainability Regulations in 2022, and after a three-year process, they were effective for the 2022–2023 season. The new regulations have three major foundations for club monitoring: solvency, stability, and cost control. This is the most significant shift. UEFA plans to increase the number of checks from two to four year in order to give club creditors greater protection, starting with the first one. All teams competing in the UEFA Champions League, UEFA Europa League, or UEFA Europa Conference League are required to fulfill this pillar. The stability requirement, on the other hand, is fulfilled by creating a new revenue rule. In fact, Europe's highest football body examines the difference between club revenues and costs over a three-year period. The resulting revenue must be invested to ensure a long-term benefit of football, e.g., in the development of youth, community or women's football.

Cost control represents a novelty for the financial management of European football. In fact, European clubs for the first time have to follow a team cost rule to allow better control over wages and transfer costs. This rule puts limits on spending on players 'and coaches' salaries and transfer fees at 70 per cent of the club's revenues, starting at 90 per cent in the season just passed, 80 per cent in the upcoming 2024/25 season and then finally applying the 70 per cent cap from 2025/26. Anyone violating these criteria will be sanctioned economically and sportingly.

In conclusion, we can state that UEFA with the development of the 'Strength through Unity' strategy uses a number of useful initiatives, campaigns and regulations to support the European football community. By including sustainability in its main actions, the European Football Council contributes to the creation of a more powerful and responsible football system. These parameters not only strengthen the sports community, but also protect against the environmental impacts of football activities.

**2.3.3. Challenges and Opportunities in integrating Sustainability principles into Football operations**

Introducing a sustainability strategy presents a number of difficulties and opportunities, but today it is considered a key factor in attracting investment in every sector, including sports. It also means a great financial opportunity for investors who aspire to sustainable and responsible businesses. In the world of sport, which is constantly evolving, sustainability is becoming increasingly important. In fact, it does not only focus on reducing environmental impact, but aims to generate fundamental change that involves the responsibility of fans, sponsors and all stakeholders. From reducing operating costs to working with eco-conscious partners, the football industry sees sustainability as a necessity to ensure long-term success. In football, revenue development is the priority for organizations that aim for success and financial stability. Adopting sustainable strategies, in addition to ensuring immediate revenue growth, allows for exponential long-term growth in a context that is constantly evolving and exposed to new risks (Moloney, 2024). An important factor that sports organizations need to consider for financial and sustainability success is operational efficiency, as it maximizes resource utilization and decreases waste generation. Doing so would reduce their environmental footprint and be able to streamline operations, reduce costs and improve competitiveness. One of the challenges that a sports association may encounter is the scale of the environmental impact associated with football events, including energy management for lighting, heating, cooling and operation of equipment, waste generation and carbon emissions from travel (Smith & Westerbeek, 2007). To reduce this large consumption and thus save on bills and energy consumption, it is necessary to invest in efficient technologies. A demonstration of this saving can be found in Rome, in the Olympic Stadium, where LED lighting lights have been installed, which have led to a 30% reduction in energy consumption. Another example of an obstacle that a company can face is being able to involve fans in its sustainability initiatives. This difficulty derives from being able to promote a culture of environmental awareness among fans, who however have a different conscience and interests towards sustainability issues. However, this also represents a strategy to grow revenues and build brand loyalty, through meaningful and eco-sustainable experiences and with sustainable merchandising for the most sustainability-conscious fans (Hansen, 2024). On the contrary, the opportunity that football has to act as a catalyst for social sustainability is very important and significant on local communities. By actively involving stakeholders in decision-making activities, football organizations can maximize the profits of their activities. Involving the community means building strong relationships with local residents and businesses, but also listening to the concerns of the community itself, responding to needs and considering feedback in decision-making processes, serves football associations to build trust and long-term support. This involves organizing meetings with the community and disseminating surveys to ensure that social demands are heard. Action for sustainability is now a key factor in attracting investment in all sectors, including sports.

This strategic shift towards sustainability is not only in line with society's growing expectations, but also presents attractive financial opportunities for investors seeking sustainable and responsible businesses. Finally, another opportunity for the integration of the principles of sustainability is the governance of football operations. To ensure that it happens at all levels of decision-making operations, transparent and accountable leadership is needed. Those who invest in a football organization are looking for a reality that demonstrates commitment to environmental management and social responsibility, which is why with the integration of sustainability into operations and their ethics, organizations can aim for differentiation in the market and attract socially active investors with priority on ESG factors ( Plantin, 2024). In fact, companies with high ESG performance can triple the performance of those with average total returns. Finally, football organisations can overcome the difficulties of implementing sustainability by strategically leveraging collaborations with external stakeholders, such as sponsors, government bodies and NGOs, tapping into new revenue streams.

In conclusion, the path of integrating the principles of sustainability into the football environment, despite being full of challenges, offers ample opportunities. Football can be considered as a great means of spreading fundamental principles to drive positive change. In fact, it can make use of its cultural influence on the community and its economic strength to ensure a strong contribution to the sustainability agenda, embracing the opportunities for environmental management and social and economic responsibility so as to become an example for other sectors and strengthen the role of sport itself as a guide for the good of society (Kihl, 2018).

**Chapter 3: Methodology**

**3.1. Research question**

In recent years, the concept of sustainability has become increasingly central to various sectors, including sports. As seen above, sustainability is often divided into three main dimensions: social, economic and environmental. Although all three dimensions are of fundamental importance, this study focuses specifically on the environmental aspect of sustainability for several crucial reasons. Foremost among them is the climate change we are experiencing, hence the interest to see how such a massive and influential industry around the world could try to help protect our planet. Indeed, with millions of fans following soccer, clubs can use the sport to spread important messages and promote sustainable behaviors. While it is true that in recent years there is an increasing focus on the sustainability aspect so much so that clubs have implemented numerous initiatives, it must be seen how these actions are perceived by the public. In fact, while potentially soccer clubs could do so much, in concrete terms it depends a lot on the fans, on their sense of responsibility. Hence the interest in focusing not only on the environmental aspect, but also on the role of the fan. Specifically, the research question guiding this thesis is, "*How do fans perceive the effectiveness of environmental measures, indicated by the 'Strength Through Unity' project, implemented by Italian clubs during sporting events?*" This question, then, aims to explore soccer fans' perceptions and attitudes about the initiatives taken by Italian clubs to reduce their environmental impact during matches and events. The 'Strength Through Unity' project provides a framework for these measures, offering a comprehensive strategy that clubs can follow in their sustainability efforts. Understanding the perceptions of fans is crucial as from this it is possible to understand how well these initiatives are understood and appreciated by them, and thus the actions that sports clubs can subsequently take.

**3.2. Data Gathering Procedure**

Data collection refers to the procedure by which precise information is measured, analyzed and selected for specific research, using validated techniques. This process can be used to answer research questions, to make company-wide decisions, or to improve products or services. To collect data, it is first necessary to identify what information is needed and the collection procedures, also considering a hypothesis based on the data that has been collected. Data collection can be considered, in most cases, the main and most relevant phase of research and is different for each field of study and depending on the information required. There are several techniques that can be used to conduct research, among which the most important are the qualitative and quantitative methods (Bhandari, 2023). Qualitative research is based on understanding an individual's events and visions through

listening, observation, and interviews. In contrast, quantitative research analyzes and draws conclusions based on numerical data alone. Specifically, the qualitative method is a technique that aims to collect data in non-numerical form and for this reason provides more detailed information than the quantitative method. The qualitative study is based on the perceptions, opinions, reasons and motivations of the interviewees, in order to be able to understand the reason for people's actions in a certain way. For this reason, it can be defined as "naturalistic", it considers natural social events, which took place in natural environments. The data this method collects can include quotes, images, and unwritten testimonials. In fact, these offer information, which, although subjective, can be interpreted to arrive at useful conclusions, offering an overview of behaviors and actions. In contrast, the quantitative method focuses on the systematic collection and analysis of quantitative data, i.e. data that can be converted into numbers and thus easily quantifiable and analyzed. This strategy is used to study correlations between variables and for forecasts based on sample data. The collection of data with this system involves questionnaires, surveys, experiments and observations and then analyzed through statistical techniques (Warner, 1965).

In this thesis I used the qualitative method to collect the necessary data. I chose this type of approach to ensure that I had an in-depth understanding by examining individual opinions, motivations and experiences. I considered it as an ideal medium for in-depth study also for the flexible and interactive proposal that it ensured me, which allowed me to keep an open communication with the interviewees, who in turn felt fully involved. This has led to greater collaboration allowing me to gather detailed information, which I would not have been able to receive otherwise.

### 3.2.1. Selection of Interview Method

An interview as a definition is a conversation between the interviewer, who asks questions based on the topics of the research, and one or more interviewees who are in a position to answer the questions received. In qualitative research, there are three different types of interviews: Free, Structured and Semi-Structured (George, 2023).

The non-structured interview is so called because of the complete absence of a structure. The aim is to have a broad overview of the subject matter. The interviewer may have previously thought of some questions but did not prepare an outline in advance to use as an aid during the interview (Creswell, 1970). This is a feature that makes it one of the most difficult to achieve, together with the type of questions to be asked, which without a precise direction, must allow the interviewee to express himself as freely as possible. In the second prototype interview, on the other hand, we have a rigorous structure that leaves no room for improvisation by the host. This allows the possible conduct of

different interviewers, with a series of closed questions, which guarantee an organization of the answers, all in the same form. In most cases, the questions require answers such as "yes" or "no", or alternatively the answers are suggested and selected by the interviewee. In fact, the structured interview can be considered the simplest of the three to be carried out and also allows a simple comparison of the results (Creswell, 1970). Finally, we have the most common technique of data gathering in qualitative research, the semi-structured interviews, the ones I have chosen to deepen this analysis. These are defined as such because they are more flexible than those defined as "structured" (Stuckey, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews are governed by a guide, which serves as a structure and reference for the questioner to ensure that the conversation takes the desired direction defined by the project. Furthermore, the questions, although predefined, can increase and become more specific based on the type of answers received (Stuckey, 2013). This kind of interview is the most used in qualitative research, because it is able to combine rigor in the topics covered with flexibility in the exchange of jokes. In fact, the questions asked are mainly "open" in order to allow the interviewee to express himself freely on the topic covered by the interviewer. In this way, it creates the possibility of deepening some points that emerged and considered most interesting, to change the order of the questions and finally to devote more time to specific topics, rather than others. The purpose of the semi-structured interview is not to follow the guide step by step, but to make sure that you have touched on all the essential points of the interview (Flick, Kardoff & Steinke, 2004). In addition to this, it also aims to collect thoughts and comments, which may not have been considered during the preparation phase and which, instead, if expanded and understood, can prove definitive for the continuation of the project. A possible difficulty that interviewers may encounter is being able to get in touch with participants residing in different geographical areas.

### 3.2.2. Development of Interview Guide

The interview protocol was designed to collect qualitative data in relation to football fans' opinions and experiences of sustainability in sport. The design process was methodical and based on qualitative research methods to guarantee that the guide would successfully capture a variety of viewpoints while staying true to the goals of the study (Kvale, 2007; Patton, 2015). The main focus of the protocol was to analyze in detail fans' opinions on the sustainability programmes offered by sports clubs and to investigate the effectiveness of the "Strength Through Unity" project offered by UEFA. The interview structure was carefully designed in seven main sections, each of which aimed to explore different parts of sustainability and fan behavior.

First in the introductive section, which contained the introductory question, was designed to create some personal context and gather basic information about the fan's background. Starting with a question about the individual experiences of the study population and when they started playing and/or loving football allowed for a personal response from the respondent, which set the framework for subsequent answers. The second part was about sustainability in general. The questions in this part were designed to reveal whether and how much the fans were aware and familiar with the word 'sustainability' in relation to sport, particularly football. In fact, this section was designed to obtain from the interviewed member, in their own words, the definition of 'sustainability' and a personal consideration of what role fans play in this area. This helped to obtain a wide range of individual perspectives.

In the third part, the practices and observations in a sustainable context have been analyzed. In this part, questions were aimed at revealing green practices carried out by fans and observations of sustainable behavior during sporting events. The examples provided in the answers included individual, collective and club actions taken to reduce environmental impact and demonstrated the actual involvement of fans in sustainability activities organized either directly by the club or by an established supporter network. The fourth section examined the influence and sustainable behavior of others. As such, the questions in this section were aimed at revealing more about the modus operandi of other fans in determining their peers' perceptions and behavior towards environmental sustainability. As a result, it became clear how football clubs and the community could help fans behave more sustainably. To this end, this section offered a field for the analysis of social dynamics together with the winning strategy for the development of a sustainable lifestyle for fans. Then, the subsequent part dealt with difficulties and opportunities. The questions were structured in such a way as to reveal the main obstacles fans face in trying to become sustainable and the opportunities they could exploit for more effective improvement. Indeed, this section revealed the practical constraints and perceptions of existing barriers and provided advice on how to overcome them and improve cooperation between fans and clubs in supporting sustainability in football. The sixth part focused on the perception of football clubs' efforts in sustainability. To this end, questions shed light on fans' perceptions of clubs' efforts to address sustainability issues. The idea of giving space to particular examples or experiences that fans felt had shaped their view meant that there were detailed and contextualized answers. Finally, the seventh and last section, explored future expectations for sustainability in football. The questions were aimed at gathering fans' expectations and hopes for future sustainability initiatives. In particular, the fans' perceived effectiveness of the "Strength Through Unity" strategy developed by UEFA was assessed and suggestions for future initiatives were

gathered. This part was designed for proactive and continuous improvement according to fans' thoughts and preferences.

Lastly, an open-ended conclusion question allowed the respondent to share any other relevant personal thoughts or experiences they had on the topic of sustainability in football. This allowed for the collection of further information, different from that obtained from the previous questions, and provided an open and inclusive closure to the interview.


### 3.2.3. Conducting the Interviews

To collect qualitative data on football fans' perceptions of sustainability, I chose to conduct the interviews in two ways: in person and via Zoom, or directly using the phone. With the use of these technologies, which provided a multitude of data and a series of interaction scenarios, I was able to ensure greater engagement and overcome geographical barriers with the interviewees. In-person interviews were conducted when geographical distance permitted. This gave me the opportunity to benefit from all their advantages, such as the ability to interact more directly and quickly and to go deeper with the questions, since in-person interviews allow you to interpret non-verbal cues such as gestures and facial expressions. These components enhance and facilitate the understanding of the answers, resulting in a more natural and continuous exchange that fosters an atmosphere of openness and trust and produces more in-depth, detailed, and sincere responses.

I used Zoom and phone calls as a substitute method to overcome the distance problem for those residing in different cities. This made it possible for all those who had been chosen for the interview to participate, increasing the representativeness of the sample. With the interviewers on zoom, it was possible to ensure eye contact, allowing for a more intimate discussion, compared to just using the phone and maintaining a non-verbal exchange. In contrast, telephone interviews provided participants with a more convenient method, because they could respond at any time and from anywhere, eliminating access and time constraints.

The combination of in-person and remote interviews revealed several strengths. Because face-to-face interviews take place in real-time, they facilitate deeper participation and more comprehensive self-reflection. Remote interviews, on the other hand, allowed the scope of the research to be broadened, as they eliminated geographical barriers to collecting data from a more varied variety of personal narratives that reflected the values and culture of their city. This adaptability has made it easier to connect with a wider spectrum of fans, which has led to a diversity of viewpoints and experiences. To ensure the integrity and comparability of the data collected, I used a sequential and standardized approach to interviews in both situations, requiring each participant to answer exactly the same

questions in the same previously agreed order. I obtained the informed consent of the participants before starting the interviews, explaining the objective of the research, describing their involvement and ensuring the privacy of the data provided. In summary, I can say that by using a combination of in-person interviews and telephone/Zoom interviews, I was able to obtain a large and varied sample of data for my study, overcoming logistical challenges and ensuring the inclusion of a wide range of interests.

## 3.3. Participant Selection and Sampling Methodology

Research on the phenomenon of sustainability within the football industry requires an understanding of the perspectives of a key stakeholder group: fans. In this thesis, in order to capture a diverse range of insights and experiences, participant selection was conducted through convenience sampling (Nikolopoulou, 2023) within my personal knowledge network, targeting fans of different soccer teams. This type of sampling is called "convenience sampling" because it consists of selecting a group of respondents conveniently available to the researcher, rather than on a random extract from a larger population (Creswell, 2014). This approach to sampling qualitative research has significant advantages that led me to choose this type for this study. In particular, the speed with which it was possible to contact fans and collect data from them proved crucial. In addition, convenience sampling allowed for greater flexibility in interacting with participants, making it easier to organize interviews in an efficient and timely manner. An additional advantage was the ability to include individuals directly involved in the subject matter as they were already knowledgeable about the issue of sustainability in soccer, and thus able to provide data relevant to the research. In addition, this methodology enabled the recruitment of fans from all age groups, thus providing a more comprehensive view of attitudes and behaviors toward sustainability.

In summary, the sampling process was guided by the following criteria (Patton, 2002):
1. Accessibility: Sampling was based on convenience in order to select participants who were sensitive to this issue and interested in taking part in the survey. This, in fact, increased the likelihood of their participation.
2. Membership in different Football Teams: Participants were selected on the basis of their stated support for different soccer teams.
3. Age Diversity: The sample included individuals from different age groups, from young adults to the elderly, to capture generational differences in awareness of and commitment to sustainability.

### 3.3.1. Rationale for Sample Dimensioning

Determining the right sampling size has always been a critical step in qualitative research as it directly affects the depth and quality of the data collected. There is no univocal answer in the number of sufficient interviews: for example, according to Sandelowski, in 1995 the size of the qualitative sample must be "*large enough to permit the unfolding of a new and richly structured understanding of the phenomenon under study, but small enough not to preclude deep, case-oriented analysis,*" (Sandelowski, 1995) or Morse in 2000 stated that "*the more usable data that are collected from each person, the fewer participants are needed*" (Morse, 2000). As can already be understood from these two examples, there is no direct answer to the question "how many?", instead we can say that the sample size depends on a number of factors such as the scope of the study, the quality of the data collected, the nature of the topic etc...

In this study, the sample size was guided by the saturation principle, which is reached when "*additional interviews provide no new insights or themes related to the research questions*" (Bunce, & Johnson, 2006).

The goal was to select a large enough sample to ensure a range of different perspectives on sustainability, and this was achieved with a sample of 12 people. Compared to a sample in a quantitative study, this might be relatively small, however, it must be remembered that the purpose of qualitative research is to go and study a phenomenon in detail rather than to generalize the results obtained.

To be more precise, the decision to limit the sample to 12 participants was made following an assessment of the level of detail achieved and information gathered. In fact, in line with this said by Morse, through one-on-one and well-structured interviews, an attempt was made to get the most valid data from each respondent, rather than increasing the number of participants but going for more superficial interviews. This approach allowed us to delve deeper into each respondent's experiences and explore in depth the perceptions and sustainability actions taken by fans. In addition, the choice of a relatively small sample facilitated more accurate and personal management of the data collection process, allowing the researcher to establish a trusting relationship with the participants and ensure a high quality of the information collected. This is particularly relevant in a qualitative study, where depth of dialogue and sincerity of responses are critical to obtaining meaningful results.

In the end, the sample size was chosen to strike a compromise between the practical viability of the research and the requirement for a thorough knowledge of the phenomenon. In fact, the choice of a

limited number of participants made it possible to devote the necessary time to each of the participants, which was useful for capturing the nuances and complexities inherent in the topic of sustainability in soccer. The sample size was a key element in ensuring content-rich and meaningful results for the purpose of this study.

The table below (Figure 6) provides a summary of the demographic characteristics and interview details of the participants involved in the study on sustainability in soccer. This summary offers insight into the gender distribution, age range, teams supported, and duration of each interview, providing a picture of the different perspectives included in the research.

Figure 6: Participants' Profiles

| Respondent | Gender | Age | Team supported | # of interview minutes |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Male | 24 | Rome | 9:31 |
| 2 | Female | 24 | Rome | 11:37 |
| 3 | Male | 22 | Rome | 8:53 |
| 4 | Male | 27 | Lazio | 10:21 |
| 5 | Male | 25 | Inter | 7:26 |
| 6 | Male | 40 | Lazio | 9:58 |
| 7 | Male | 22 | Lazio | 13:37 |
| 8 | Male | 35 | Lazio | 7:19 |
| 9 | Male | 45 | Genoa | 15:13 |

| 10 | Male | 27 | Lazio | 10:36 |
|----|------|----|-------|-------|
| 11 | Female | 26 | Rome | 14:32 |
| 12 | Male | 26 | Rome | 11:03 |

First, a detailed demographic analysis of the 12 participants was conducted in order to better understand the composition of the sample. In terms of gender, the majority of participants were male, accounting for 83.33 percent, while females accounted for the remaining 16.67 percent. In regard to age, the participants had an average age of about 29.08 years. However, to get a more accurate picture of the age distribution within the sample, the median was also calculated, which stood at 26 years. The median is particularly useful because it is less affected by extremely high or low values, which can distort the mean, and thus provides a more reliable indication of the 'middle' age of the group.

Going on, the analysis of the soccer teams supported by the participants revealed a predominance of Lazio and Roma fans, each represented by 5 supporters, making up nearly half of the sample. This is followed by a single supporter for both Inter and Genoa. This distribution reflects a variety of football affiliations, although with a greater concentration on two teams from the capital.

Finally, the study of the time spent on each interview showed that the average time spent per interview was about 11.03 minutes, with a median of 10.48 minutes. The shortest time recorded for an interview was 7.19 minutes, while the longest was 15.13 minutes. This amount of time implies that each participant had the chance to fully communicate their thoughts and experiences, which helped the study develop a complex and nuanced knowledge of the phenomenon it was investigating.

In summary, the size and composition of the sample, along with the time spent on each interview, provided a solid basis for the qualitative analysis, ensuring that the perspectives gathered were representative of experiences and views on sustainability in soccer.


### 3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

To guarantee the correctness, dependability, and comprehensiveness of the outcomes, a thorough and methodical procedure was followed in the analysis of the data gathered during the interviews. (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). This process included several key steps: transcription, familiarization

with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme revision, and finally, interpretation and presentation of the results.

The first stage was the transcription of the interviews. Each interview supported was recorded, with the consent of the participants, and transcribed using a Digital Tool. Since they were held either in person or through Zoom or via telephone, I used different approaches. As for the telephone ones, after each transcription of each interview I checked and corrected any errors made by the tool used. In contrast, during the interviews conducted in person, in addition to recording I also took notes, focusing more on body language than on what the interviewee was saying. This is because, being recorded only vocally, I would have missed what the interviewees did. Last, the data collected were digitized by transcribing the notes taken on each interviewee into the same document as their interview. This made the collected data more manageable and facilitated the next steps of analysis.

As a second step, preparation and organization of newly collected data is always necessary, as very often they are not immediately ready for analysis. In fact, first of all, the data must be collected through physical or digital storage to ensure that they are kept securely and organized. I personally stored them digitally, in a unique folder I named "Interview_Data_Response" In addition, to ensure that the data can be understood, used, and tracked, accurate documentation and metadata is necessary. Documentation ensures a context for understanding the data and correctly interpreting the information collected, even in the future. Metadata, on the other hand, is data that represents other data (Bazeley, 2013). In this case, used for qualitative interviews, they collect information that describes contingencies and details of the interviews themselves, such as the date, place and duration of the interview, name of the interviewee, and interview format. At this point, all data can be structured to fit this model. This ensures its integral preservation while maintaining its authenticity and reliability. It also allows access to the necessary data in the least amount of time and with the least amount of effort required to get to specific information.

After the interviews have been transcribed and analyzed, familiarization with the data is necessary, representing an important step in qualitative analysis. A deep understanding of the data is essential to build a solid analytical foundation (Creswell, 2018). This consists of reading and re-reading the transcripts to provide researchers with initial thoughts and interpretations. In fact, at this point in the analysis, during the re-reading of the interviews I took notes on recurring themes, possible interesting ideas, and potential points for further investigation. Careful engagement in reading the data allowed

me to develop, on their basis, tangible interpretations that could be further analyzed and developed in the later stages of the analysis.

Data collected from sustained interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative research method suitable for analyzing data collected from interviews. This method allows the systematic identification of patterns and themes within the data through the process of coding and categorizing the information received. What emerges from this process can then be interpreted and used for understanding the phenomenon studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, with this method, one applies the decomposition of a text into its most significant parts such as words, sentences, or paragraphs and analyzes how these are structured and related to each other. In addition, it is important to formulate clear research questions, trying to continuously improve the analysis to create a coherent storyline and to achieve qualitative accuracy in the study (Gioia et al., 2013). Understanding the structure and organization of a text is important for researchers as they are able to understand its meaning and embodied interpretation (Flick, 2013). The data collected and transcribed from the interviews were analyzed by coding and developing a data model. Specifically, each interview was subjected to inductive coding in order to discover and develop new themes and patterns, within each one. Finally, common concepts and themes were sought in order to create the final data model.

"Coding" is an analytical process through which data are analyzed, organized and finally interpreted. In the context of qualitative research, the initial coding stage is a crucial moment in the analysis since it allows the researcher to synthesize and give meaning to the large amounts of information collected that are otherwise difficult to interpret. To be more precise, the term "codes" refers to labels or tags that are assigned to specific segments of data representing ideas, concepts, feelings, themes, or categories. These segments can be as short as a single word or sentence or extend to entire paragraphs. The primary function of coding is to help identify and track recurring elements within the data, facilitating the organization and comparison of similar information. Indeed, through the coding process, it is possible to begin to build a conceptual framework that reflects the experiences and perspectives of the study participants.

Personally, I began this phase by going to actively reread the interviews so as to capture the meanings of the interviews. I then segmented the data into meaningful units, assigning codes to relevant sentences, paragraphs, or concepts that emerged from the interviewees' responses. Coding was conducted openly and inductively, without predefining codes, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Within my research, 6 main codes emerged, which are as

follows - Fan Passion (FP), Sustainability Definition (SD), Peer Behavior Influence (PB), Eco-friendly Practices (EP), Challenges and Opportunities (CO), and Future Expectation (FE). In addition, two additional sub-codes were identified for each major code (Figures 7).

Figure 7: Codes and Sub-Codes

| Codes | Description of Codes | Sub-Codes | Description of Sub-Codes |
|-------|---------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| FP | Fan Passion | FP-BG | Beginnings of Passion |
|      |                     | FP-EC | Emotional Connection |
| SD | Sustainability Definition | SD-IM | Importance of Sustainability |
|      |                          | SD-SP | Sport as a Path to Sustainability |
| PB | Peer Behavior Influence | PB-CE | Community Engagement |
|      |                         | PB-SC | Social Campaigns influence |
| EP | Eco-friendly Practices | EP-RW | Waste Reduction |
|      |                        | EP-UEI | UEFA and Club Initiatives |
| CO | Challenges and Opportunities | CO-OB | Obstacle to Sustainability |
|      |                              | CO-CC | Club and Fan Collaboration |
| FE | Future Expectations | FE-UEFA | UEFA's "Strength Through Unity" Strategy |
|      |                     | FE-FI | Future Initiatives Desired |

Starting with the first code, "Fan Passion" (FP), this is intended to highlight what are the motivations behind the birth of this passion and consequently the emotions that fuel the love for soccer. In fact, the two subcodes into which "Fan Passion" has been articulated are "Beginnings of Passion" (FP-BG) and "Emotional Connection" (FP-EC). These reveal how passion for soccer often takes root in childhood and is reinforced by family ties or significant events, and how this passion translates into a deep emotional connection with the team and the fan community, influencing their collective experience during games and outside the stadiums.

The second code - "Sustainability Definition" (SD) - embodies the ideas that fans have about sustainability in soccer and the different interpretations and knowledge they have about it. This main code encompasses within it two sub-codes. The first, "Importance of Sustainability" (SD-IM), which describes the different importance soccer supporters attach to this variable and whether or not they see it as crucial to the future of soccer and the planet itself. The second, on the other hand, represented by "Sport as a Path to Sustainability" (SD-SP) seeks to capture supporters' opinions about soccer as a means of promoting sustainable practices and positively influencing society.

Moving on to the third main code "Peer Behavior Influence" (PB), this examines how social interactions and campaigns influence sustainable fan behaviors. These two different sources of influence are captured in the subcodes "Community Engagement" (PB-CE) and "Social Campaigns Influence" (PB-SC), respectively, first describing how collective engagement and the actions of others can inspire individual behaviors, and then how social campaigns raise awareness and mobilize fans toward sustainability.

The fourth code, "Eco-friendly Practices" (EP), collects on the one hand the sustainable practices that football clubs adopt and that fans know and are able to observe during football events, and on the other hand the concrete practices adopted by fans themselves to reduce their environmental impact. The first sub-code is "Waste Reduction" (EP-RW) as it is an example that was mentioned by all respondents and to which they attach a lot of importance; this refers to efforts to minimize waste inside stadiums. The second, on the other hand-"UEFA and Club Initiatives" (EP-UEI)-explored the initiatives promoted by soccer institutions to encourage eco-friendly behaviors and their effectiveness.

The "Challenges and Opportunities" (CO) code goes on to encapsulate both the obstacles and potentials that have been identified by participants in the path to sustainability. At first, a focus is made on what are the main difficulties that fans face in achieving the sustainability goals set by clubs through the "Obstacle to Sustainability" (CO-OB) subcode. Next, light is shed on opportunities for collaboration between clubs and fans to improve sustainable practices through the subcode "Club and Fan Collaboration" (CO-CC).

Finally, the "Future Expectations" (FE) code reflects what fans' expectations and hopes are for the future. "UEFA's 'Strength Through Unity' Strategy" (FE-UEFA) assesses the effectiveness of current

strategies and the gaps found that make room for action in the future, and 'Future Initiatives Desired' (FE-FI) captures fans' aspirations for future initiatives that can more robustly address sustainability in soccer.

Once the initial coding was complete, the codes were grouped into broader themes to identify similarities, differences, and relationships between them. This phase required critical reflection to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the data and were not influenced by personal biases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After identifying the preliminary themes, a review of the preliminary themes was carried out to ensure their consistency and validity. I then re-examined all transcripts to verify that each theme was supported by data and accurately represented the experiences and opinions of the participants. This phase included refining and redefining themes, consolidating similar ones and discarding those not sufficiently supported by data (Patton, 2002).

Finally, as a last step we come to the interpretation of the collected data. In fact, here the researcher tries to combine the results obtained with the theoretical context, but more importantly with the objectives of the research trying to bring to life a complete picture of the results obtained. Having reached this point, the researcher often asks himelf "what were the lessons learned?". Personally, to answer this question I started from what I had learned from the literature and then read with a critical eye what were the experiences of the participants interviewed in order to intend whether or not the results of my study were in line with what had been stated so far. The presentation of the results will be covered in more detail in the next chapter of "Results and Discussion".

**Chapter 4: Results and Discussion**

**4.1. Roots of fans' passion for soccer**

In this first part, we will explore how the passion for football is born and nurtured among Italian fans. Through the interviews carried out, we will find out what are the triggers of the love for this sport. Our interviewees' stories give us an insight into the different paths that lead to becoming a supporter, highlighting how early experiences with football can leave an indelible mark on a person's identity and their connection to the fan community. This first analysis will allow us to understand the different experiences and consequently ideas that differentiate the interviewees.

Since the aim of this study is to understand football fans' perception of sustainability, the first thing I wanted to focus on is the personal experiences of fans and the origins of their passion for football, as elements that prove to be fundamental to understanding their approach and responsiveness to sustainability initiatives.

From the answers of the interviewees, recurring themes emerged at the basis of the birth of the passion for football, first of all the family influence. As it is possible to grasp from the words of Respondent 4 "Breathing the love for football in the family, I began to become more and more passionate about this sport since I was a child" or Respondent 6 "My passion was born thanks to my father who handed it down to me since I was born" it is possible to understand how the family context plays a very important role in transmitting the passion for this sport. Love often arises from the presence of father figures who transmit a real tradition, an enthusiasm that constitutes an element of generational continuity. In fact, many respondents cited experiences lived with their grandparents, the first times at the stadium, presenting a strong emotional attachment to these events. This aspect shows how in Italy, football is a sport strongly rooted in family culture and which often represents a meeting point, but above all a point of sharing between several generations. A further common theme that was highlighted by respondents and which is directly related to family influence is the Italian football tradition. Respondent 2 brought to light a very interesting fact by stating that "in Italy, with the great tradition that exists, it is a process that in my opinion is almost natural. It's something that belongs to us a lot, so I would say it's all quite automatic." These words reflect a sentiment shared by Italian fans, namely that football is not just a sport, but a cultural phenomenon that manifests itself in every aspect of daily life. Respondent 10 brought very concrete examples such as the discussions in bars that have become meeting points for this sport, the sticker album that is exchanged every Sunday or

the main squares crowded during the most important matches. These are events and gestures that are rooted in local traditions and that eliminate any social and economic difference between fans as they all share the same spirit of love for a team. Italian culture is also characterized by a strong sense of belonging and local identity, and with this we come to the third theme behind the birth of the passion for football. This feeling is deeply rooted in the hearts of the fans so much so that respondent 7 argues that "Football for me is more than just a sport, it is a piece of my identity; When I wear my club's shirt, I feel like I represent a history, a community and a set of values that define who I am" or participant 3 who describes football as something that "binds you to a team and leads you to rejoice and cry for it". For many fans, football clubs are an essential part of their identity. If at first the gesture of wearing the jersey of the favorite team may seem a trivial, superficial gesture, when the words of the fans are heard it is not at all, on the contrary it is an act full of meaning. In fact, they do it because by wearing this jersey they tell a story made up of successes, defeats, traditions and hopes. It's not just about supporting a team during a match, but a sense of belonging that extends far beyond the ninety minutes of play. Football also influences the identity of a fan from the point of view of values: football, as a vehicle of principles such as teamwork, perseverance, and loyalty, affects the behavior of the fan even outside the sporting context. In short, this identity is strengthened game after game, experience after experience and manifests itself in every aspect of the fan's life. We can speak of a real faith in this sport that is expressed through the ritual of the weekend match, the choice to wear a jersey with the colors of one's club, or the active participation in the life of the team as a member.

In conclusion, from the first words of the interviewees it is possible to understand how in Italy football is an intrinsic phenomenon in the history, culture and identity of people, which can arise from different sources, but which leads everyone towards a common destiny: an endless passion for the team of their city.

These first elements have allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of "fan" in Italy and will be crucial to understand how the concept of sustainability, and the initiatives related to it, can be integrated within the community of fans, becoming part of that same tradition, but above all of that sense of identity that football represents for them.

## 4.2. Understanding of Sustainability

After a careful analysis of the background of each participant, the theme of sustainability was explored. As we have seen previously, this is a topic that is becoming increasingly important in the sports world as the social, economic and above all environmental impact is significant. In this phase,

the aim was on the one hand to understand the level of knowledge and awareness that the interviewees have towards this important topic, and on the other hand to assess their perceptions and expectations in this regard.

What emerged from the participants' responses is a heterogeneous understanding of the concept of sustainability, ranging from those who are aware of the social and environmental implications of football to those who have shown a more superficial knowledge, due to the fact of the little information received.

Starting from this second group, the first aspect I want to highlight is a point brought out by respondent 2, who said "*if you ask me how you would define sustainability in the world of football, well I tell you that I don't know, in my opinion it is a topic that is not talked about much*". This is a significant issue because despite the fact that in recent years sustainability has gained a lot of importance and above all a lot of attention, in the world of football it still seems not to be the case. This lack of knowledge and information can result from various factors, such as a lack of communication or data that is not accessible to the general public. This lack, however, could lead fans to perceive football and sustainability as two unrelated and therefore distant issues. Fan 8 also said "*My knowledge on the subject is not very deep, as a fan I think that sustainability within football is unfortunately still neglected*". The use of the word unfortunately makes us understand a sense of concern for the lack of recognition of the importance of this phenomenon. He seems to attribute his limited knowledge to the fact that the world of football does not have an active role in promoting sustainability: in fact, the fan implicitly highlights a lack of educational initiatives towards the community of fans, which could instead increase the knowledge of sustainability among them. Although some respondents highlighted these gaps, most of the participants instead demonstrated a deeper knowledge of sustainability in football, albeit in different aspects. There are those who focused more on environmental sustainability, those on the economic aspect and those on the social one, demonstrating how articulated and complex this phenomenon is. When we talk about sustainability without specifying a particular area, it is natural for people to think about what is most relevant or urgent to them. For some, environmental sustainability was the first to be mentioned. Respondent 4 said: "*One of the many meanings of Sustainability is to waste as little as possible (no waste). In this regard, in sport, particularly in football, one could think of avoiding waste such as a new game kit every Sunday, a new boot every week, the excessive paper or plastic used during sporting events, etc.*" or even respondent 3 spoke of sustainability by expressing concerns about the large energy consumption of stadiums, indicating an awareness of the environmental impact linked to football activities. There are those who instead focused more on the economic aspect such as interviewee 9

who said, "*Sustainability means having the possibility with the income to manage a football club*", and highlighted elements such as marketing and financial support from the State as pillars to ensure the economic stability of clubs. Moving forward, respondents 1 and 11 focused on the social aspect, highlighting how football plays a predominant role in the social fabric and how sustainable practices should aim to enhance this aspect. Finally, interviewee 6 provided a holistic view that includes both the social and environmental aspects, describing sustainability as "*a balance between sporting competition and respect for environmental resources and social and educational aspects*".

The fact that responses vary so widely highlights the importance of inclusive dialogue and a holistic approach when discussing sustainability in football. It is crucial to recognize and value different perspectives in order to build a comprehensive vision that takes into account all aspects of sustainability.

Despite the different interpretations of the interviewees about sustainability, they all agreed on one fact: the crucial importance of this issue for the future of football. In fact, they no longer see it as an option, but as an urgent necessity for all football clubs on the one hand and fan communities on the other to ensure a future for the sport. Many fans, such as the 3-4-7-8-9 and 11 have highlighted the crucial role that football can play in promoting sustainable practices, for example they have said "*Certainly with the large turnout of fans that exists and who go to the stadium, who follow the shows, or the matches, certainly what I think is that if every fan played a small part of course you would still have a huge result from any point of view*". The awareness shown that every action counts, and that the collective contribution of the fans can make a difference, is a recurring theme in the responses. They therefore recognize that on the one hand football has a great influence, but on the other hand a great responsibility is entrusted to the fans. Everyone recognizes that the role of the fan is important in this transition to more sustainable football and that they could take some actions such as *"not printing a ticket for a sporting event but using the digital one; or respect separate waste collection inside stadiums or, in any case, in the places where sporting events are held*". However, respondent 8 brought to light a very relevant insight namely that "Fans *as well as citizens, as much as we try to make them responsible with the method of "blame", actually reflect what the clubs offer them, most of the time at least. The basic example can be that of garbage or vandalism inside stadiums and how this phenomenon almost completely disappears in modern, well-kept structures that offer the alternative, unlike dilapidated stadiums where cleaning and disposal costs rise"*. Finally, participants also expressed a desire to see clubs and football associations take a more proactive approach to sustainability, and to engage their fans more to amplify the impact of such initiatives. These statements show how the responsibility is therefore mutual: on the one hand the clubs that must put

in place policies that promote sustainability, on the other the fans who must embrace and support these initiatives. In this context, the transition to a more sustainable football can be seen as a shared path, where every individual action is part of a larger collective picture, and where everyone's commitment is essential to bring about meaningful and lasting change.

## 4.3. Eco-Actions on the Stands

Once the perception that the interviewees have of sustainability was understood, they moved on to explore what these actors do in practice. At first, we will see what are the practices that fans put in place to date or that they have observed from their peers, while at a later time we will see what are the sustainability initiatives promoted by clubs and their involvement in them.

Starting from the environmental practices adopted individually by fans, they can be enclosed in three large groups. The first undoubtedly concerns transport. In fact, many fans have testified that a good practice is to go to the stadium by public transport or even on foot. For example, respondent 8 said "*I always try to adopt basic ecological practices which, however, I believe that if adopted by all the thousands of fans who attend sporting events every day, they could make a difference: I personally go to the stadium by public transport or, when possible, on foot*". 75% of respondents mentioned this practice, however one respondent brought to light a problem related to this area by stating the following "*luck has it that I can reach the stadium on foot and this makes my arrival more sustainable, but those who do not have this possibility do not have many alternatives to reach the Olimpico except by car, or motorcycles". This observation caught my attention, as it reflects the difficulties that I also encounter in the complex urban reality of Rome, so I wanted to explore this topic more deeply with the respondent. The latter has expressed a desire to adopt more sustainable behaviors but finds himself limited by the excessive distance and the lack of adequate public connections between his city and the stadium. Despite this, he said that he tries to contribute by organizing with other fans in order to reduce the number of cars used. Such personal initiative not only demonstrates active environmental responsibility, but also represents an example of how collaboration between individuals can lead to practical solutions that mitigate the impact of infrastructure problems. Sharing trips, in addition to being* a more environmentally friendly alternative, promotes socialization among fans and can help create a more united and environmentally conscious community.

The second large group of environmental practices concerns waste management and consequently separate collection. A significant number of fans expressed their desire to avoid leaving waste on the ground during matches and to engage in separate collection, as well as the use of recyclable materials.

For example, respondent 12 shared: "*I am very careful not to leave waste on the ground and to separate materials according to the indications of separate collection*". This testimony reflects a responsible attitude that, if adopted collectively, can result in a significant environmental benefit. But also, respondent 7 said that "*I try to avoid the consumption of food or goods that are contained in non-recyclable plastic wrappers and, when possible, I try to dispose of the waste I produce according to separate collection. In the sporting context, I certainly notice more and more a search towards the reduction of waste and dirt*". This change in attitude is evident not only among fans, but also within sports organizations, so much so that he mentioned a specific example, namely "*I certainly remember during the final of a major sporting event a major initiative promoted by UEFA, based on the reuse of plastic cups used for drinks in such a way as to significantly reduce waste*". Despite this commitment, even in this context a fan brought to light a problem by noting that from Flaminio to the entrance of the Montemario (in particular the music bridge, bunker classroom, tennis stadiums, etc.) there are practically no garbage cans. The presence of adequate infrastructure is a key element to encourage responsible behavior by fans and above all to ensure proper waste management during sporting events. The fans' reflection shows how, since sustainability is an issue of increasing importance for fans, they pay attention to infrastructural deficiencies and even if willing to carry out sustainable practices they are unable to do so. The situation just described therefore underlines the importance of a joint commitment between event organizers and football clubs to improve infrastructure and facilitate the adoption of sustainable practices. In fact, if on the one hand the individual responsibility of fans in managing their waste is fundamental, on the other hand it must be supported by an adequate infrastructure that facilitates implementation.

The third and final group that emerges from the testimonies of fans is related to the purchase of e-tickets instead of traditional paper tickets. This change in behavior is part of a context of digitization and sustainability, where the reduction of the use of paper becomes a concrete goal to minimize the environmental impact. An example of this trend was provided by respondent 12, who said: "*I always prefer to buy e-tickets for matches; In addition to being more comfortable, I know that I am doing my part to reduce paper waste and pollution*."

In the course of this section, a second fundamental aspect was examined, namely that of sustainability initiatives promoted by both clubs and supporters' groups. Specifically, two interviewees talked about two initiatives in which they took part recently. Respondent 2 described his involvement in an environmental project: together with other organized fans and charities, he participated in clean-up operations in the areas adjacent to the stadium. This activity, known as Plogging, combines physical activity, such as jogging, with waste collection, thus promoting care for the environment in a dynamic

and participatory way. On the other hand, respondent number 11 highlighted her commitment to more social initiatives, actively participating in campaigns aimed at raising awareness and combating violence against women and racism. These activities underline how sustainability in football embraces both an environmental and social dimension, reflecting the commitment of the fan community to positive impact. However, it is important to note that only two of the twelve interviewees have actually participated in these initiatives. This observation brings to light a phenomenon known as the "say-do gap", or a discrepancy between what fans say they support and what they actually achieve. Although there is a strong statement of interest in sustainability, the shift from this interest to active and tangible engagement turns out to be a non-negligible obstacle. To close the "say-do gap", it is crucial that clubs and organizations promoting sustainable initiatives work to raise awareness, make participation more accessible and provide tangible incentives that motivate fans to move from intention to action. In addition, it is important that these initiatives are well communicated and that they are perceived as relevant and impactful for fans, so as to stimulate more active engagement.

## 4.4. Community Influence and Encouragement Strategies

In the previous section we saw the concrete initiatives implemented by fans and the presence of the "say-do gap" phenomenon, for this reason during this section, we wanted to investigate how the social dynamics between fans and club policies can influence and therefore also promote sustainable practices related to the world of football.

At first, through the analysis of the answers provided by the twelve interviewees, an attempt was made to understand how fans perceive each other's influence. It was interesting to see how many respondents recognized the importance of example in guiding their actions. The first interviewee underlined that "*certainly if I see many people adopting a specific practice, I am more inclined to replicate it"*. This phenomenon of social imitation was also highlighted by other participants, such as the 3, who noted how adherence to sustainable practices is encouraged by the mass movement of a group of fans. Even those who expressed that they maintain a specific identity and that there are no specific actions that influence their behaviors, recognized that the collective environment can have an impact on individual choices. For example, respondent 6 said "*I tend to always try to keep my personality and not be influenced by who and what surrounds me, but I think it is natural that the attitudes or actions of some fans in football can affect those of others in terms of sustainability. Giving some examples, I think it is foreseeable, although not shared, that in a context in which most fans do not follow the basic rules of conservation and subsequent destination for the recycling of waste (for*

*example by throwing everything on the ground and not using objects made of recyclable or biodegradable materials), even that component of the fans moved by much nobler intentions can be "attracted" by this behavioral model".* This response highlights the complexity of social interactions and the role they can play in promoting, but also hindering, sustainability in football. In fact, it is good to always keep this double side of the coin in mind and make sure to put in place targeted interventions that can counteract negative influences and strengthen positive ones, creating a context in which sustainable practices become the norm and not the exception.

As for possible strategies to encourage fans to adopt more sustainable practices, respondents proposed a variety of solutions. Respondent 1 suggested that clubs could use social media and the internet to drive awareness campaigns. In fact, as pointed out by some fans, the dissemination of messages through these platforms can have a significant impact, taking advantage of their widespread reach and frequency of use. The second proposed solution is the organization of days dedicated to sustainability, which could serve as catalysts for the adoption of more ecological behaviors. These days, strategically placed before sporting events, could provide fans with the opportunity to learn and actively participate in sustainable initiatives, making sustainability an integral element of the sporting experience. The third strategy emphasizes the role of footballers as ambassadors of sustainability. In particular, respondent 6 said "*One way to raise awareness more among the fan could be to listen to the players' stories. This could lead to the average fan being more involved and educated towards certain issues*", highlighting how the personal testimonies of footballers can be particularly touching and influential, using their status to promote positive change. Finally, the fourth solution focuses on the use of incentives, such as discounts and rewards, for those who choose sustainable options, such as using public transportation to get to the stadium or purchasing environmentally friendly food and beverages within the stadium.

These four solutions, if implemented in a strategic and coordinated manner by football clubs and the community, could significantly contribute to reducing the "say-do gap" and transforming interest in sustainability into concrete and measurable actions.

## 4.5. Perception of Football Teams' Efforts in Sustainability

At this point, and therefore understanding the meaning of sustainability, given the initiatives promoted by the clubs, the participation of fans in them, we wanted to investigate the perception that the participants have about the efforts that the clubs are making regarding the field of sustainability,

as it represents a crucial indicator for the success of these initiatives. In fact, by examining the responses of the interviewees, it is possible to better understand how supporters evaluate the commitment of their clubs in this area.

Importantly, most fans feel that football clubs' commitment to sustainability is not yet meeting current expectations or needs. Respondent 8 points out that "*clubs, to date, in the vast majority of cases are de facto ignoring the existence of the problem*", thus indicating that only a minority is investing in sustainable initiatives, both basic and larger. He also points out that clubs, by acting in this way, are not recognizing the potential benefit that could derive from a serious commitment to sustainability. A second respondent, on the other hand, highlights the lack of discussion and information on the sustainable practices adopted by the clubs, focusing in particular on environmental sustainability. He says, "*I don't think it's talked about enough. One should inquire, if there is a way, about aspects such as what percentage of renewable energy companies use.*" This shows how the uncertainty about how much clubs are actually doing to reduce their environmental impact reflects a lack of transparency and communication that could instead stimulate greater interest and participation from fans. Finally, a third participant argued that in his opinion the percentage allocated to investments in sustainability are absolutely not adequate and indeed, in his opinion, some clubs tend to favor initiatives that "can be eye-catching", rather than adopting an authentic and collaborative approach to sustainability. In summary, the participants' arguments reveal a common perception that football clubs need to step up their efforts in sustainability, not least because they are aware of the impact that football has on the environment and society, so they would like clubs to take a more proactive and responsible approach.

Despite the general perception that football clubs are not devoting sufficient resources to sustainability, it is important to recognize that a small proportion of respondents have noticed positive movements in this direction. One participant, a regular visitor to stadiums, noted that "*football clubs are devoting more and more resources and attention to sustainability issues*", citing the organization of thematic days and the distribution of gadgets or certificates as examples of initiatives undertaken. Another respondent highlighted that "*some football clubs are taking significant steps towards sustainability",* but equally stressed that the sector as a whole could do more, drawing attention to the role of international football organizations. This view suggests that while there are examples of clubs that are actively engaging, more coordinated effort is needed at the level of associations such as FIFA and UEFA to promote sustainable practices on a larger scale.

I then asked the interviewees if they could translate what has been said so far into concrete examples and therefore if there were specific initiatives that shaped their point of view on the efforts made by football clubs towards sustainability. In analyzing the responses, a very interesting insight emerged, namely that the participants when citing specific examples went to look at international initiatives. One respondent drew attention to the new layered structure of Real Madrid's stadium, praising the club's significant investment in a modular structure that can accommodate different activities without the need to construct new buildings, an approach that represents a sustainable and multifunctional investment. Another example cited is that of Forest Green Rovers, an English club known for being the first completely sustainable football club in the world, with practices that include the use of renewable energy and vegan food. All this confirms that, although some Italian clubs are starting to move towards sustainability, investment in our country still seems limited compared to what is being done abroad. Fans tend to cite examples of international clubs as pioneers in this field, which underlines the need for greater commitment and more incisive action in Italy to achieve the same levels of sustainability already seen in other countries.

## 4.6. Opportunities and Challenges for Sustainability in Football

The path towards greater sustainability in football is not linear, so much so that fans but equally clubs are facing opportunities and challenges. Starting from the perceptions of the fans, this section analyzes what are on the one hand the opportunities for improvement for a greener future in this sport, and on the other hand the difficulties encountered by supporters to achieve this result.

Starting from challenges, they can sometimes be long and complex. One of the aspects that was mentioned several times by respondents is ignorance, too little knowledge about this issue of the fans. Respondents 1, 3, 8, and 9 ranked ignorance as a major challenge as a lack of awareness can hinder the adoption of sustainable behaviors. Therefore, they stressed the need for greater engagement by societies in environmental and social education and awareness. Respondent 3 said "*the real obstacle is that not everyone can understand the issue, they do not have the sensitivity towards this issue and therefore they do not realize some acts ... They don't understand that maybe throwing a glass bottle on the ground rather than another plastic object is a problem for the environment and so they do it*". It is clear that here there is not only a theme of education, but also of emotional awareness and a deep understanding of the consequences of one's actions. To bring about real change, clubs need to adopt strategies that go beyond simply passing on data and facts, and that engage fans in an educational journey that touches their conscience. The path can be long, but only through constant and targeted commitment is it possible to promote a cultural change in fans that will lead to more responsible behavior within the football community. The second obstacle that emerged from the testimonies of

the interviewees concerns the infrastructure related to sporting events and their ability to support sustainable practices. Starting from the words of fan number 3: "*In my opinion, the environments used for sports days are not always equipped for sustainable practices. In fact, it happens that the lack of tools such as the non-functioning of a separate collection can lead the fan not to participate*" it is possible to understand that despite the desire to do one's part, one is often unable to do so due to the lack of adequate structures and functioning services. It continues with "*Clubs and events in general must give priority in my opinion to practices of this kind and provide every necessary means for fans to contribute*"; The use of the expression "must prioritize" indicates that sustainability should not be considered a secondary aspect, but a central and fundamental element in the management and organization of football events. Respondent 6 addresses the issue from an even broader point of view, highlighting the condition of the facilities themselves: "*I think there are many obstacles I have encountered in trying to be environmentally aware as a football fan. Firstly, old and dilapidated structures, far from 'suggesting' or 'inspiring' sustainability*". It follows that the current conditions of these facilities not only do not support sustainable practices but can also have a demotivating effect on fans who wish to adopt more sustainable behavior. Once again, the commitment that the clubs must put on this aspect is recalled; Through the modernization of existing facilities and the development of new solutions that are more environmentally friendly, stadiums can become examples of sustainability and places that encourage fans to contribute.

Although fans have highlighted a number of challenges in the area of sustainability in football, their awareness does not stop at the challenges encountered. There is widespread recognition that, as significant as the barriers may be, the space for opportunity is even wider. This optimistic perception is crucial because it suggests that despite infrastructural, cultural, and knowledge barriers, there is a strong potential for positive change. In this vast panorama of opportunities, fans see collaboration with clubs as the solution to increase sustainability in football. One of the most promising strategies concerns transports, which as seen above is a much-discussed topic by participants. Respondent 7 highlights that "*There are many opportunities for fans and football clubs to work together to improve sustainability in football. Clubs can organize match shuttle services, reducing the use of private cars, or they can negotiate discounts on public transport tickets for match days and promote these options to fans*". The organization of shuttle services to matches is a practical example of how clubs can on the one hand facilitate sustainable transport, encouraging fans to leave their cars at home and opt for shared solutions that reduce the overall environmental impact, but on the other hand also improve the overall fan experience, making access to the stadium easier and less stressful. In addition, there is a second proposal by the fan, namely, to offer discounts on public transport tickets for match days in order to opt for more environmentally friendly options and this could also have a direct effect on the

daily habits of fans, therefore outside the context of the matches. Connected to the topic of discounts, there is the "rewards" system mentioned by another participant, who also reported a concrete example of Roma. Nowadays, the latter organizes contests with prizes such as autographed jerseys or free admissions to the stadium, as a result the participant expressed the idea of how such initiatives could be extended to include the theme of sustainability. In fact, fans could be motivated to behave in a more environmentally friendly way if this were associated with the possibility of winning prizes or receiving recognition. Another example he mentioned is "*There's a psychological game that's a reward of any kind. Even just framing the face of the best sustainable fan at the stadium generates a sort of competition in the human mind to do the best job possible*". This suggests that clubs can leverage gamification mechanisms to incentivize sustainable behavior, creating a positive dynamic of emulation and participation. In fact, the simple act of giving visibility to fans who stand out for their sustainable practices can also have a significant impact on the behavior of others. Finally, another significant opportunity highlighted by respondents 4, 11 and 12 is collaboration between football clubs and educational institutions. This can give rise to the creation of training programs aimed at raising awareness among young people on environmental sustainability issues. The importance of such collaboration lies in the ability to educate the new generations, not only on the theoretical principles of sustainability, but also on how these can be applied in daily life and within the sports community. Clubs can play a central role in this process by making their facilities available to host educational events and hands-on learning activities. In addition, the use of footballers as ambassadors could further strengthen this opportunity as athletes, admired and followed by millions of young people, have a significant influence and can inspire positive behavior through their example. When players advocate for sustainable practices, the message they convey has the potential for resonance and much broader impact. Incorporating sustainability into the education of young people through football can have long-term effects, creating a fan base that not only appreciates the sport, but is also actively engaged in protecting the environment.

As we have just seen, therefore, and as evidenced by the ideas of the participants, the opportunities for more sustainable football are numerous, but above all tangibles. Through concrete actions and collaboration between all the actors involved, football can actually contribute to a greener future.

## 4.7. Future Expectations for Sustainability in Football

This last section wants to start by exploring the effectiveness of the "Strength Trough Unity" strategy in promoting sustainability and then go on to identify what are the initiatives/actions that they hope will be implemented in the near future.

UEFA's 'Strength Through Unity' strategy, which, as seen above, aims to inspire, activate and accelerate the action of all football actors towards respect for human rights and respect for the environment in European football until 2030, has provoked mixed reactions among fans, reflecting different perspectives on its effectiveness in promoting sustainability and a sense of community. From the analysis of the responses collected, a clear division emerges among fans: on the one hand, there is a group of supporters who look with optimism at the adoption of this strategy, believing that it can represent a significant turning point in promoting sustainability and strengthening the sense of community among fans; on the other hand, there are those who believe that the strategy is not yet sufficiently incisive or that it is not producing the desired results. Starting from this second group, there are those who said that "*Although the 'Strength Through Unity' strategy is a step in the right direction, I am not completely convinced that it is already effective in promoting sustainability and a sense of community among fans. The strategy must be more than a slogan; It requires clear action plans, measurable targets and transparent reporting of progress*." From this first statement it is possible to understand how, although the fan has recognized that this strategy has been a great achievement, it is still far from the desired results. It recalls the concept discussed so far, namely the lack of information to fans and progress reports, underlining the need for more effective communication and deeper involvement of supporters. The interviewee emphasizes the importance of greater transparency on the part of federations, which should provide regular and detailed updates on the efforts made and achievements in the field of sustainability. This would not only increase awareness among fans but could also stimulate greater interest and active participation in environmental initiatives. In fact, it ends its testimony by saying "*Furthermore, to make fans feel part of a community, it is necessary that they are actively involved in the initiatives, rather than being simple passive recipients of information*" confirming the importance of a participatory approach of the fans. Participant 8 brought to light another perplexity about this strategy: "*Unfortunately, the points made explicit in the "Strength Through Unity" strategy can be universally shared at a conceptual level, but the feasibility depends on a considerable number of factors, first of all the evident inability of football to have economic sustainability, despite the numerous efforts, more or less concrete, of national and international federations. This economic instability is reflected in the possibilities of clubs to keep up with the times*". The respondent acknowledges that while sustainability principles may be widely accepted in theory, their practical application is complex and faces several obstacles. The point on which he focuses his attention is football's inability to have economic sustainability, thus suggesting that the financial difficulties of the sector may limit the ability of clubs and associations to invest in sustainability. This implies that, despite the desire to promote sustainable practices, football's economic realities can hinder the investments needed to

bring about meaningful change. Moving on to analyze the second group of fans, they are enthusiastic about the implementation of this strategy. Respondent 6 said "*The 'Strength Through Unity' strategy represents, in my opinion, an effective first measure to promote sustainability and a sense of community among fans in football; First of all because, for the first time, it shows a certain attention on the part of the institutions towards the problem and its possible solutions, and secondly because, although subject to improvement, I believe that it contains numerous rules and ideas that can provide more than one useful starting point for the achievement of the common goal*". The fan is optimistic about the fact that for the first time even football institutions seem to be giving prominence to such a delicate issue as sustainability, interpreting the strategy as a sign of a change in mentality within sports organizations. He sees value in the actions taken so far, but above all he believes that this strategy is based on strong points that, if developed and implemented correctly, could lead to a significant result. Even from the words of respondent 12 you can perceive great enthusiasm: "*Reflecting on the 'Strength Through Unity' strategy adopted by UEFA, I can say that I am very supportive because we have finally come to see football as a source of sustainability and community*". His endorsement of this strategy shows optimism for the future, where football can play a central role in uniting people around sustainability goals. The respondent anticipates an era in which football will not only be entertainment, but also a catalyst for environmental education and action, underlining the importance of this moment as a starting point for a deeper and more widespread engagement across the industry.

Starting from these answers, I then wanted to explore what are the actions that fans would like to see put on the ground in the near future in order to contribute more to sustainability. Specifically, fans' expectations extend to different aspects of the sports industry, with a focus on manufacturing practices and the materials used. The first action they would like to be implemented because it affects them more closely and because also speaking from a timing point of view is the one that would require the least time concerns the drastic reduction of plastic waste, up to the complete elimination of single-use plastic in stadiums. Then the topic of stadiums was touched: "*Stadiums and sports centers must necessarily become central points in social life, not only of the football team, but of the urban centers themselves, it is no longer thinkable to create and keep active "cathedrals" that light up only on weekends or match days. Both at the level of building construction and energy efficiency, and precisely at the level of self-consumption and production of renewable energy (potentially also for the context surrounding the stadium, in the form of an energy community, for example), stadiums and sports centers must become models for the structures of the future*". This declaration reflects a progressive and multifunctional vision of stadiums and sports centers, seeing them not only as places

dedicated to sport, but as vital poles for social and community life. The respondent's vision is that of an environment in which every citizen, fan or tourist, can interact with the stadium in different ways, taking full advantage of the potential of these facilities. Adopting this approach would not only allow stadium spaces to be used to the fullest but would also help save money and protect the environment. In addition, it would make stadiums feel an integral part of the city and people's lives, not just places where you go to see a match. Finally, respondents who were enthusiastic about some concrete initiatives recently carried out by sports clubs, expressed the desire for further measures of this type to be introduced and on a more regular basis. The words of respondent 4 were: "*I hope to see football clubs engage more in sustainability-related projects such as the one just promoted by AS Roma where for every goal scored, they plant 3 trees in urban or rural areas*". His statement also reflects the desire to see clubs not only as sporting entities, but as responsible and proactive actors in society, using their visibility and influence to promote positive change.

Fans' expectations paint a clear picture: there is a desire to see a profound change in the issue of sustainability. Fans, aware of the power of football as a social force, want to see football clubs and associations authentically engage in existing sustainable initiatives, but they also want to see them innovate and intensify these efforts.

**Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The aim of this thesis was to investigate in depth a topic that is still little explored in the world of football, namely sustainability. In particular, this research aimed to study fans' perception of the effectiveness of the sustainable measures adopted by Italian clubs, with a particular focus on the "Strength Through Unity" project promoted by UEFA. Football, being a sport or rather a global phenomenon that involves billions of people, is always in the spotlight and in an era where sustainability is taking on an ever-increasing role, this sport is at the center of a debate on its ability to promote sustainable practices. In this context, the opinions of fans take on crucial importance as they are the main users of sport and the potential promoters of a change towards more responsible behavior. Through a qualitative analysis, and specifically through conducting in-depth interviews with 12 fans from different teams, I sought to understand their degree of awareness and involvement in their clubs' environmental and social policies, as well as to assess their effectiveness and perceived impact.

The analysis of the responses obtained revealed a series of results that highlight the complexity and variety of fan perceptions regarding sustainability in football. Initially, it turned out that this is an issue that still does not receive the attention it deserves within the football world: many participants pointed out that "it is not talked about enough", indicating a lack of awareness and public discussion on this crucial topic. A second relevant aspect that emerged from the study is the so-called "say-do gap", i.e. the discrepancy between the declared intentions of fans and their actual actions. Although they believe that sustainability is important and that even a small gesture by all fans could lead to significant results, many fans admit that they do not actively participate in the initiatives proposed by their clubs, suggesting the need for greater involvement and more effective strategies to transform interest into concrete behaviors. Coming then to the core of the thesis, namely the "Strength Through Unity" strategy, this has generated conflicting opinions: on the one hand, those who have taken a more critical position and who, while recognizing the importance of the issue, believe that the actions taken are still insufficient and that much still needs to be done to achieve the desired sustainability goals. On the other hand, those who expressed sincere appreciation for the efforts made so far, recognizing the value and importance of creating a more sustainable football culture; In fact, they are confident that these initiatives can lead to positive change in the long term. Despite their differences of opinion, the two groups are united by one aspect: hope for the future of football. In fact, both recognized and suggested a variety of opportunities that federations could seize to accelerate the achievement of tangible results in terms of sustainability. In conclusion, the thesis highlighted a growing interest and demand for more incisive and frequent environmental actions from fans, who

are ready to support and celebrate clubs that are actively committed to sustainability. These expectations represent an opportunity for clubs to strengthen their bond with fans and demonstrate their commitment to a more sustainable future, but also a challenge to invest in initiatives that live up to the demands and needs of our time.

Despite these findings, it is important to recognize some limitations of this study that could affect the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the research focused on a very small and specific sample of fans, belonging to a national context and to certain football clubs. For future research, therefore, it would be useful to extend the study to a wider and more diverse sample, including fans of different nationalities and football clubs of various leagues, to obtain a more complete and representative view of perceptions at an international level. Secondly, the qualitative nature of the research, based on semi-structured interviews and analysis of fan perceptions, could be complemented with quantitative studies using objective data on the performance of clubs. This would allow fan perceptions to be compared with concrete measurements of the impact of sustainability initiatives. Finally, an aspect that could be explored in future research is the evolution over time of the sustainability policies adopted by football clubs. Considering that sustainability is an ever-evolving area, it would be interesting to monitor how clubs' strategies and actions adapt to changing market conditions, but more importantly to the growing expectations of fans. In conclusion, while this thesis has provided significant insights and an in-depth understanding of current perceptions, it lays the foundations for further investigations that can explore the relationship between football and sustainability more widely and in more detail.

## Chapter 6: References

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**Appendix**

**Interview Guide**

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| **Section 1 - Opening Question** |
| 1. Can you tell me about your experience as a football fan? How did your passion for the sport begin? |
| **Section 2 - Understanding of Sustainability** |
| 2. In your own words, how would you define sustainability in the realm of sports, particularly football? |
| 3. Why do you think sustainability is important, and what role do you believe sports fans play in it? |
| **Section 3 - Sustainable Practices and Observations** |
| 4. Can you describe any eco-friendly practices you adopt or have observed others adopt while attending or watching football games? |
| 5. Have you ever been part of any sustainability initiatives linked to football, either organized by fans or the clubs themselves? |
| **Section 4 - Influence and Peer Behavior** |
| 6. In what ways, if any, have you noticed other supporters influencing your attitudes or actions toward environmental sustainability in football? |
| 7. How do you think football clubs and the community could encourage fans to adopt more sustainable behaviors? |
| **Section 5 - Perception of Football Teams' Efforts in Sustainability** |
| 8. From your perspective as a supporter, do you feel that football teams are allocating sufficient resources and attention to sustainability issues? Why or why not? |
| 9. Can you cite any specific examples or experiences that have shaped your view on the efforts made by football clubs toward sustainability? |
| **Section 6 - Challenges and Opportunities** |
| 10. What obstacles, if any, have you encountered when trying to be environmentally conscious as a football fan? |
| 11. From your perspective, what are the opportunities for fans and clubs to collaborate on enhancing sustainability in football going forward? |

| **Section 7 - Future Expectations for Sustainability in Football** |
|---|
| 12. Do you think the 'Strenght Trough Unity' strategy adopted by UEFA is effective in promoting sustainability and a sense of community among fans? <br><br> 13. What are some initiatives or actions you hope to see implemented by football teams or governing bodies in the future to address sustainability? |
| **Section 8 - Closing Open-Ended Question** |
| 14. Is there anything else you'd like to share about football and sustainability, or do you have any personal experiences or stories that stand out to you in this area? |