

Article

“If You Don’t Know Me by Now”—The Importance of Sustainability Initiative Awareness for Stakeholders of Professional Sports Organizations [†]

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[†] This title comes from a song by Harold Melvin & the Blue Notes (1972).

Abstract: This study explores the importance of sustainable initiatives (SI) in sport for the stakeholders of a professional sports organization (PSO) after three months of absence of the public at the stadiums due to the pandemic situation. Two topics—diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and the attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC)—were considered and analyzed. A third factor—the distance of residence of the members and the PSO—was considered as an element of the possible relationship between the awareness of the SI and the assessment of the topics in question. A total of 5694 PSO members took an online survey. Through the description of the data, the results show that being aware of the SI performed is a crucial factor for the success of the SI. Distance positively influences SI awareness. The topics considered are rated most positively by members with awareness of the SI, with a higher rating for the topic with the highest external visibility.

Keywords: sustainable initiatives (SI); professional sport organization (PSO); distance; awareness; stakeholders; COVID-19; sport ecology



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1. Introduction

The sports industry, characterized by Underwood et al., 2001 [1] as an industry with “high levels of identification” (p. 1) among its consumers, annually moves billions of euros globally [2]. With millions of fans around the world, some of the most powerful brands on the planet are PSOs such as the Manchester United football club and the New York Yankees baseball team [3]. Sport helps to contribute to community development and greater social awareness [4] and can play a decisive role in the implementation of results related to sustainable development [5].

The general public is increasingly interested in climate change. Regardless of the industry, consumers tend to value sustainable products and brands. Consequently, organizations often publish sustainability reports that demonstrate their sustainability-related efforts [6]. Interestingly, in the sports sector, the trend of other industries is not followed, with a scarcity of reports on what sustainability refers to, that is, “the sport sector’s record of sustainability reports does not mirror this response” (p. 394).

One of the aspects to take into account in the development of a more sustainable society is through the evaluation of the effectiveness of the initiatives performed by PSOs [7]. Better communication of a PSO SI can positively influence consumers to behave in a more environmentally friendly way (e.g., by recycling) [4]. With its origins in the concepts of sustainable development, sustainability science is a new discipline [8] and sport ecology,

as an emerging subdiscipline within sport management, is even newer [6]. Due to the complexity of the problems studied, as well as the increasing specific (i.e., fragmented) knowledge, having a holistic perspective thus becomes essential in this subdiscipline [8].

In addition to the mandatory preparation of an annual sustainability report, there are three main reasons for a PSO to carry out an SI survey: (1) the perception of stakeholders is important; (2) topics such as diversity and inclusion (DIVIN); and (3) attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC) are just three of the topics considered when identifying material issues that have a greater impact on PSO activity in sustainability development.

The power that sport has in today's society can help in the way sustainability is understood and practiced by everyone. By studying the websites of 19 Major League Soccer clubs in the US, Francis et al., 2017 [9] indicate that sports institutions have made an effort to reduce their impact on the environment, and recycling is an example of this. However, the authors conclude that the SI carried out by Major League Soccer clubs are dependent on their location, with a special predominance in the Western Conference clubs. In their own words: "The location and environment that these franchises are in tell a bit of the reason why some of the teams are making contributions to the sustainability movement" (p. 405). In this study we want to analyze the importance of the proximity fan residence to the PSO facilities in relation to the awareness of the SI performed.

Derived from the former literature and intended to support the emerging discipline of sport ecology, this study explores the importance of SI in sport for PSO members in the time of a pandemic. Specifically, two topics were considered, and the distance from the members' residence was taken into account in the analysis. A quantitative study was accomplished taking into account the SI and intends to (i) identify SI awareness of members; (ii) analyze the importance of distance in SI awareness; (iii) explore the relationships between the PSO assessments on the topics covered—diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC)—and the SI awareness; and (iv) examine the relationship between DIVIN and ARHC assessments and the physical distance of stakeholders.

Through a case study, this research contributes to deepening the study of an evaluation of SI campaigns carried out by a PSO [7] and the perception of members' receptivity to the initiatives performed and the topics presented [10]. It differentiates itself from other research conducted in two ways: (1) by focusing the "distance factor" as an element that can contribute (positively or negatively) to a greater and better awareness of the SI carried out by the PSO; (2) in the evaluation of two SI topics with different levels of visibility. With regard to the SI, this is one of the few studies carried out outside of North America and is the first study in which the impact of distance is measured regarding PSO members SI awareness. Members' awareness of PSO SIs could be the most important factor in the success of the campaign, and, consequently, in possible changes in member behavior in favor of a more sustainable environment.

The article is organized in a sequential manner, starting with a literature review focused on the importance of distance in the sports context, the relevance of PSO sustainability initiatives, with particular focus on the two topics considered for the study. The section on research design presents the objectives of the study, the questions that guided the research, and the hypotheses on which the conceptual model of the study is based. The Materials and Methods section contextualizes the PSO in analysis and describes the data collection and processing process. Results are discussed, and the corresponding conclusions are provided. In sequence, the general conclusion is presented. A reflection on the theoretical and practical contributions of the study is made and avenues of future research are provided.

2. Theoretical Background

As a business strategy, sustainability has assumed a prominent place [11]. From a business point of view, the environmental management of an organization is an asset and promotes the company's performance [12]. Pro-environmental behaviors related to climate change and the preservation of the planet have a positive impact on environmental

sustainability [13]. In the area of sustainability, the sports industry is no exception, with sports organizations showing a growing behavior in sustainable actions [14]. Commitment to implementing sustainability initiatives is a reality because, as recent studies suggest, the social and economic objectives of sports organizations can benefit from these actions [7]. In terms of sustainable fan behavior, this has been the object of study in sporting events and in their daily lives [15]. Although the promotion of environmental initiatives by sports organizations is doubly favorable (e.g., in the links between supporters and organizations as well as in promoting more sustainable behaviors) [11,14], their influence on the fans is not clear [13].

Extending past research, it is our goal to acknowledge how the most important professional sport organization (PSO) stakeholders (i.e., members) [2,16,17] value the topics presented within the scope of sustainability initiatives (SI) [6,10,18] and the relationship between distance and the awareness of these SI [19,20].

2.1. Distance

In sport, the presence of thousands of fans accompanying their favorite teams at each sporting event has positive and negative aspects (e.g., generated economic development and increased pollution, respectively). Human travel is one of the biggest contributors to air pollution and the growing emission of greenhouse gasses is a threat to a world that claims to be more sustainable. Transport is one of the main contributors to pollution. Globally, sustainability is understood from the perspective of a triple bottom line (i.e., social, environmental and economic) as benefits that derive from company behavior in favor of the environment. In the sports industry, due to greater difficulty in measuring social and economic dimensions, the environmental dimension has been the most scrutinized by researchers.

Greenhouse gas emissions from spectator travel to and from football matches were calculated by Dosumu et al., in 2017 [20]. The authors concluded that although CO₂ emissions account for less than 0.05% of transport emissions in England, football authorities must have robust travel plans and educate spectators to employ more sustainable travel plans for games. Another study concerning the carbon footprint created by spectators in transport to access university sporting events was done by Triantafyllidis et al., in 2018 [19]. One of the important factors to take into account refers to the location of the stadium in relation to the spectator's home area. The authors chose locations on and off campus, defining them as high and low population density, respectively. They concluded that, depending on the locations concerned, the type of transport chosen by the participants is different. The analysis of these two different stadium locations gives an accurate view of how the spectators' mode of transport influenced CO₂ emissions and whether the stadium location changed the level of CO₂ emissions per spectator.

Through a qualitative study with parents of underage players from two hockey teams, Chard and Mallen, 2012 [21], studied the environmental impact of car use for "outside" game trips. Since travel is a necessary byproduct of being able to compete in hockey, to alleviate the pollution derived from this activity, the authors proposed measures at the individual (e.g., car-pooling) and collective (e.g., having a reorganization of the league's game schedule by the organization) levels. The environmental impacts of major sporting events are a fact and, at the political level, their consequences make action increasingly urgent, with the objective of having a more sustainable society. The "ecological footprint" of the British Football Federation (FA) Cup final was studied by Collins and Flynn, 2008 [22], and the conclusions are that consumption activities related to food, drink and transport behavior and types of waste are the greatest impact factors in the ecological footprint.

Quantitative studies on the environmental impact of events are also relevant. In small-scale university sporting events held at a university, Dolf and Teehan, 2015, [23] investigated the carbon footprint of spectator and team travel by analyzing travel patterns. They concluded that university spectators had a smaller footprint than teams per person, but a larger overall carbon footprint. The authors suggested measures to reduce the footprint of spectators and teams, namely through a smaller number of long-distance air

travel events and increasing the vehicle occupancy rate. Most studies carried out on the carbon footprint focus on sporting events and, to a lesser extent, on sporting teams. The perspective of active participants in sport was embraced by Wicker, 2019 [24], through a study on the heterogeneity of individual consumer behavior in Germany (6537 adults, 20 sports), and whether for regular training or competitions considering travel distances and transportation is meaningful. The author concluded that there is a greater relationship between environmental awareness and a smaller carbon footprint in favor of individual sports to the detriment of team sports.

Due to the lack of models to evaluate environmental sustainability initiatives, Trail and McCullough, 2019 [7], created and tested a model for evaluating sustainability initiatives among participants in an endurance race. They identified that the needs and values of the participants are aspects to be considered in the initiatives to be developed by sports managers and managers. Testing the non-response bias distance covered for the run was taken into account. Orr and Schneider, 2018 [25], found that winter tourism, particularly in countries with northern climates, has been negatively affected economically due to climate change. The choice of alternatives by consumers depends on several factors, with the distance between the person's home and the location of the activity being an important one. Therefore, for active sport tourism such as cross-country skiing, the role of distance in the type of decisions taken while choosing alternatives is important. All the studies mentioned above consider distance as a common element.

2.2. Sustainable Initiatives Topics in the Professional Sport Organization Questionnaire

The approaches that PSOs undertake within the scope of sustainability initiatives are diverse. The International Olympic Committee, with its work entitled "Manual of Sport and Environment" [26], clarifies key concepts about sport and the environment, provides recommendations and suggests policy and concrete actions. Another study, focused on the awareness of stakeholders concerning sustainable environmental initiatives in sport (ESIS) [27] carried out by a PSO, stresses the importance of these initiatives being more publicized in order to obtain better sustainable behaviors by consumers. The study of websites of professional clubs and leagues has been used by researchers over the years [28–31]. With regard to sustainability practices, [28] the websites of 126 teams from four different leagues (NFL, MLB, NBA, NHL) were examined from three dimensions (social, environmental and economic). The authors concluded that although the type of communication varies according to the league in question, social items are more valued than economic items. In the Asia Pacific region, dissemination of information about activities related to the environmental sustainability of different modalities (e.g., football, basketball, baseball, and rugby, among others) was analyzed [29]. Compared to North America, the authors noted that there is less communication about sustainability initiatives by professional sports teams in the Asia Pacific region. Another study [30], regarding the website communications of teams from Major League Soccer, concludes that, with regard to sustainability, there are three key areas: the use of renewable resources, the minimization of resources and recycling. The reduction of the negative impact of the sports industry actors (i.e., professional teams and leagues), and the subsequent implementation of sustainable programs were also the object of study [31]. The authors note that in addition to the financial and strategic advantages of the new way of being in terms of sustainability, the attraction of new customers and the enhancement of the consumer experience are factors to be taken into account. Online surveys have been utilized in different contexts, such as the study of sustainable attitudes [7], marketing sustainability through sport [32], corporate credibility in corporate social marketing [31] and the carbon footprint of active sport participants [25]. Fan engagement has also been studied under the perspective of athletics departments [10,33] or professional sport organizations [10,15].

In the PSO under study, more than 30 sports are practiced. Throughout its history, around 1860 titles have been won in all sports. Although the PSO is mostly known for football, in the ranking of sports with the most titles won, football only appears in fourth

place, behind athletics, billiards and cycling [34]. According to the knowledge we have concerning PSO stakeholders [27], we believe that this study can be another step towards a better understanding of the behavior of one of the main stakeholders of the sports phenomenon favoring a more sustainable society. There are two SI topics focused in the questionnaire: diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC). We then characterize the topics in the light of the PSO context.

2.2.1. Diversity and Inclusion

Three areas of action characterize the topic diversity and inclusion (DIVIN): (a) promoting equality; (b) accessibility (to the infrastructures and displacement in them); (c) sport (promotion of physical activity and practice of adapted sports). This is a topic that is characterized by having great external visibility.

With regard to the promotion of equality, with the contribution of an internationally renowned brand, the PSO carried out a campaign to promote equality and gender. Entitled “Many Faces”, the aim was to reinforce the message of equality, regardless of skin color or gender [35]. More recently, the PSO marked the International Day of Persons with Disabilities by releasing several images in which the athletes from the Adapted Sports section of the club appear together with professional players from different sports [36].

In the design and planning of the Estádio do Dragão (FC Porto stadium) as well as the adjacent infrastructure (e.g., the Dragão Arena and office buildings) sustainability was a priority objective. FC Porto Stadium is the axis of the environmental strategy of the club, being the first football stadium in the world to be awarded five stars by UEFA, receiving integrated quality and environmental certification [37]. The stadium is on the same level as the best football clubs in Europe, with a capacity of 50,033 spectators [38,39]. In the 2018/2019 season, before the mobility restrictions imposed by COVID-19, FC Porto had an 82.6% stadium occupancy rate, one of the highest in the Portuguese League [38]. As for accessibility, access and mobility are important factors (e.g., stairs, turnstiles, elevators, access ramps, and signage) and recently the stadium—the PSO’s main infrastructure—was ranked first in the world in terms of inclusivity for the colorblind [40].

With regard to the practice of adapted sports, the PSO has around 100 federated athletes in seven sports (boccia, basketball, football 7, futsal, swimming, table tennis and goalball) [41]. The importance that the PSO gives to adapted sports is visible in that the trophies won by athletes are presented [42] in one of the most visited cultural places in the city, the FCP Museum, which boasts the top position in museums to visit in the northern region of the country and, together with Estádio do Dragão, is distinguished by TripAdvisor as 1 of the top 10 tourist attractions in Porto city [43,44].

2.2.2. Attraction and Retention of Human Capital

The topic attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC) is crucial for any organization, and the sports industry is no exception. Attracting talented human capital is the gateway to the organization and the beginning of engagement with the organization. Retention, on the other hand, refers to a bidirectional effort between the organization and the employee in order to achieve organizational goals. This topic is also characterized by three areas of action: (a) keeping human resources motivated; (b) strengthening cohesion and team spirit; (c) leveraging talent and adding value to talent. It is a topic that is characterized by not having external visibility.

Employing hundreds of collaborators, promoting the practice of sports to thousands of practitioners followed by millions of fans, and moving hundreds of millions of euros annually, the enormous visibility of PSOs in society increases the degree of responsibility of their most direct stakeholders: the collaborators. The three action areas defined above in this topic are fundamental to the economic, financial, sporting and social success of the PSO.

3. Research Design

The present study focuses on the level of awareness that the PSO members have about the SI implemented considering their area of residence. To develop this research a sum of specific goals was determined: (i) identify SI awareness of members; (ii) analyze the importance of distance in the SI awareness; (iii) explore the relationships between the PSO assessments on the topics covered, diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC), and SI awareness; and (iv) examine the relationship between DIVIN and ARHC assessments and the stakeholders' distance. To better understand the importance of distance in members' SI awareness, five research questions (RQ) were defined:

- RQ1. Are members aware of the SI programs implemented by the PSO?
- RQ2. What is the importance of distance on members' SI awareness?
- RQ3. How do the PSO members evaluate the topics of DIVIN and ARHC?
- RQ4. What is the relationship between members' SI awareness and the assessment of the topics of DIVIN and ARHC?
- RQ5. What is the relationship between distance and the members' assessment of the topics of DIVIN and ARHC?

The effect of distance is a subject studied in different contexts [26,45], although there is a lack of previous research in the active sport events setting. Based on that, research hypotheses (H) are considered as follows:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *PSO members' SI awareness is influenced by distance.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *PSO members' SI awareness influences DIVIN assessment.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *PSO members' SI awareness influences ARHC assessment.*

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Distance influences DIVIN assessment.*

Hypothesis 5 (H5). *Distance influences ARHC assessment.*

The basis for the design of the conceptual research model depicted in Figure 1 considered the large dimension of the sample ($n = 5694$). The findings from the empirical data are discussed in relation to the literature from the two studies developed, focusing on the identification of the FC Porto members.

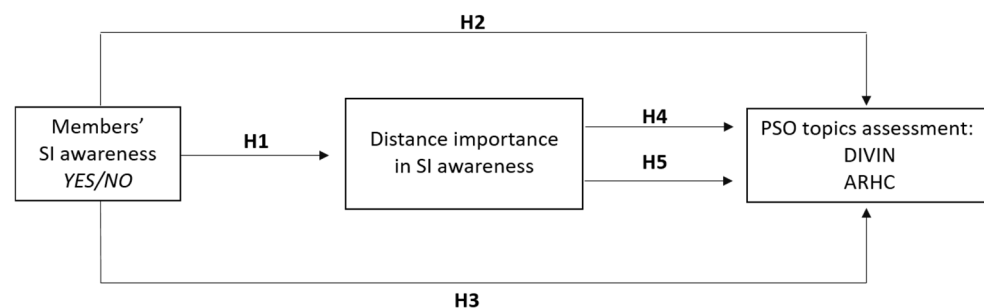


Figure 1. Research design.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Research Context

This research was conducted on a professional sports team located in the Northern Region of Portugal. FC Porto is a PSO that brings together a range of sports, including handball, basketball, indoor football, beach football, roller hockey, cycling, boxing, weightlifting and billiards. FC Porto is considered a pioneer in SI and quality certification, developing several actions and events in this area since 2007.

The relevance of this team and the good results achieved throughout its history have led the club to have a large number of supporters. Within the group of supporters are the members that currently count about 140,000, placing FC Porto on top of the Portuguese clubs with the largest number of members [46] and among the top 10 largest clubs in the world considering the total number of members. According to Finance Football [47], only 10,000 members separate FCP from Manchester United, which is in first place with 150,000 members. Its popularity extends to social networks, being the Portuguese club with the highest level of engagement [46] and number of followers on social networks (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok), with over seven million followers [48].

The growth in the number of FC Porto members is significant. In 1977 there were 52,830 members, 90 percent of whom lived in Porto or nearby (e.g., Vila Nova de Gaia, Gondomar, Maia, Matosinhos and Valongo) [49]. Currently, the number of supporters is no longer regional—there are “only” 60% in Porto Metropolitan Area—but has significant expression throughout the country and even all around the world, mainly through the emigration phenomenon [50]. This fact reveals the deep roots of the PSO at the social level and its connection to the members, who constitute our sample.

4.2. Data Collection

The empirical study was based on a quantitative approach based on the distribution of an online survey among the PSO main stakeholders (members). The survey administration procedure was conducted by e-mail from the FC Porto office to its members in June of 2020, collecting a total of 5694 responses. The criteria for inclusion applied exclusively to members with updated membership fees, following the example of previous research [51].

The research instrument was designed focusing on the average number of members that are aware (i.e., informed) of the SI promoted by FC Porto; identifying the places of residence of the respondents and monitoring the club members’ assessment of different topics. As mentioned before, this study is focused on two SI topics—diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and the attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC). These were classified by the respondents on a Likert scale of 5 points (from “very bad” to “very good”). The criteria to establish the different groups of analysis was based on geographical distances regarding PSO members’ districts of residence. A website (www.distanciasidades.com, accessed on 6 October 2021) was used to estimate the distance between the center of Porto City (Praça Mouzinho de Albuquerque) and members’ places of residence.

4.3. Data Treatment and Analysis

To analyze the collected data, a descriptive statistical analysis was developed using SPSS 25.0, conducting frequency and mean analysis. The descriptive data allow us to identify the number of members that are aware of the SI promoted by the FC Porto (Table 1), to characterize the club members regarding the place of residence and also to identify the performance levels on SI topics (DIVIN and ARHC). The multivariate analysis was based on establishing correlations between the three variables considered for analysis in the study, considering the two groups of respondents. Inferential statistics were calculated to test the research hypotheses.

Table 1. Members SI awareness.

Members Awareness	Frequency (n)	%
NO	3708	65.1
YES	1986	34.9
Total	5694	100

5. Results and Discussion

The outcome out of data are examined in the context of the literature, centering on identification of members who are aware of sustainable initiatives (SI), what is the

importance of distance in the SI awareness, and what is the organizational performance concerning the topics studied: diversity and inclusion (DIVIN) and attraction and retention of human capital (ARHC), and investigated the relationships between the topics covered, SI awareness, and the distance of the stakeholders.

5.1. Awareness

Regarding the total sample, we can confirm that the massive prevalence of the members (65.1%, $n = 3708$) were not aware of the sustainable initiatives (SI) boosted by the PSO. In light of a group analysis ($n = 5694$), around a third of the members (34.9%) were aware of the initiatives executed (Table 1).

5.2. Distance

The FC Porto members who answered this questionnaire are spread all over the country. In fact, they come from all districts of the continent as well as from the two autonomous regions (Azores and Madeira). However, as expected, there was a huge concentration of responses in the district of Porto (71.8%), see Table 2, composed of only $n = 100$ or more.

Table 2. Members location by District.

District	Frequency (n)	%
Porto	4104	71.8
Braga	335	5.9
Aveiro	328	5.8
Lisbon	233	4.1
All the others	694	12.4
Total	5694	100

We found that 71.8% of the survey participants live in the Porto district. Through a detailed analysis of the data, we realize that members who live in cities neighboring the city of Porto correspond to a high percentage of the sample. In this way, we proceeded to a division of the sample members by zones, thus making it possible to have a more precise notion about the distance each member is from the central point defined in the city of Porto. Based on previous research [10,14], three zones were established: Zone 1 is the city of Porto; Zone 2 goes up to 10 km away; and Zone 3 covers all areas beyond 10 km (see Figure 2).

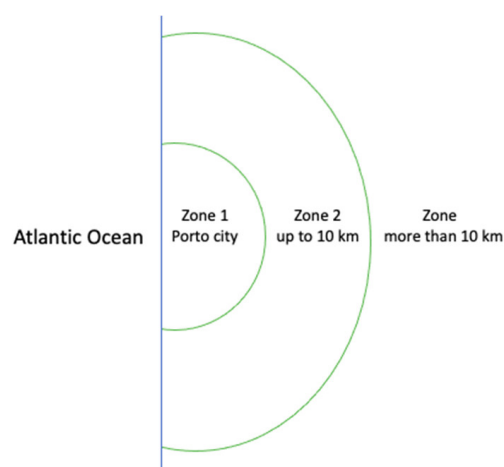


Figure 2. Members location by district.

Through this division, we observed that half of the sample (50.5%) was at most 10 km (i.e., located between Zone 1 and 2). In Table 3, we can see the general population for each zone and member numbers and percentages in particular. Once the zones were determined,

we found that members in Zone 1 represented the smallest group in the survey (i.e., Quest, $n = 1098$, 19.3%). However, in contrast to the global population, Zone 1 members (0.47%) constituted nearly twice as many respondents as Zone 2 members (0.29%), and tens of times more than Zone 3 members (0.02%).

Table 3. Population, concerning members' residence zones and members' locations.

Zone	Global Population (GP)	Quest (n)	GP/%
Zone 1	231.962	1098	0.47/19.3
Zone 2	611.777	1776	0.29/31.2
Zone 3	9,504,153	2502	0.02/43.9
NULL	-	318	-/5.6
Total	10,347,892	5694	100

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2021).

Among the members who were aware ($n = 1986$) of the SI carried out by the PSO, distance had a positive influence. As the distance increased (Zone 3), there was a tendency for members to have higher SI awareness. A greater distance corresponded to a superior awareness of the SI carried out (see Table 4). Between the members who were not aware ($n = 3708$) of the SI carried out by the PSO, distance had a negative influence. As the distance increased (Zone 3), there was a tendency for members to have a greater ignorance of the SI. A greater distance corresponded to an enhanced ignorance of the SI performed (see Table 4).

Table 4. SI versus location.

Zone	SI Awareness	No SI Awareness
	$n/\%$	$n/\%$
Zone 1	336/16.9	762/20.5
Zone 2	631/31.8	1145/31
Zone 3	932/46.9	1570/42.3
NULL	87/4.4	231/6.2
Total	1986/100	3708/100

To test H1, checking if there were differences between the members' SI awareness according to their three location areas, the chi-squared test was used. The results demonstrate there was not a significant association ($p > 0.05$) between distance and SI awareness.

Topics

In the sphere of sustainability, concerning the significant topics of action for FC Porto: (a) diversity and inclusion, DIVIN; (b) attraction and retention of human capital, ARHC; a Likert scale of five points (from "Very bad" to "Very good") was provided for the members to grade the status of significance given to each topic (see Table 5).

Table 5. SI classification on topics DIVIN and ARHC.

SI Awareness	Very Bad		Bad		Medium		Good		Very Good		Total
	$n/\%$		$n/\%$		$n/\%$		$n/\%$		$n/\%$		n
	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	
NO	241/6.5	174/4.7	237/6.4	239/6.4	785/21.2	850/22.9	1219/32.9	1373/37.1	1226/33	1072/28.9	3708
YES	131/6.6	89/4.5	91/4.6	109/5.5	353/17.8	354/17.8	613/30.9	748/37.7	798/40.2	686/34.5	1986

We verified that more than half of the members classified the topics mostly between values 4 and 5 of the Likert scale (i.e., "good" and "very good") and we joined them (n and

percentages). In general, both topics achieved very high similar numbers, regardless of SI awareness, as indicated: “not aware”, DIVIN 65.9% and ARHC 66%; “aware”, DIVIN 71.1% and ARHC 72.2%. However, we found that, although slight, there was a tendency for members who were aware of the SI to rank the topics in question with higher values than members who were not aware of the SI. The results in Table 6 demonstrate that.

Table 6. DIVIN and ARHC: “Good”/“Very good” versus “SI awareness”/“no SI awareness”.

	DIVIN	ARHC
SI Awareness	n/%	n/%
NO	2455/65.9	2455/66
YES	1411/71.1	1434/72.2

To test Hypothesis 2 (H2) and Hypothesis 3 (H3), the Mann–Whitney test was calculated to correlate SI awareness with the performance attributed to the DIVIN ($z = -5.158$, $p < 0.001$) and ARHC ($z = -5.119$, $p < 0.001$). The results of both topics confirm there is a statistically significant association between the variables, with the SI-aware members scoring higher on DIVIN and ARHC than members with lower SI awareness.

The vast majority of members (65.1%) were not aware of the SI carried out by the PSO (Table 1). Although the members who responded to the questionnaire reflected the national dimension of the PSO, half resided less than 10 km away (Table 4). Distance was a factor that influenced positively or negatively, depending on the members’ SI awareness. The two topics considered (DIVIN and ARHC) were highly ranked, with a tendency towards higher classifications by members who were aware of the SI (Tables 5 and 6).

5.3. Topics Assessment

We also analyzed the group of members who were aware of the SI executed by the PSO and the classification of the topics by members considering their distance (i.e., zone, see Table 7).

Table 7. SI awareness.

Zone	Very Bad		Bad		Medium		Good		Very Good		Total
	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	n
Zone 1	24/7.2	20/6	16/4.8	13/3.9	64/19	54/16	109/32.4	141/42	123/36.6	108/32.1	336
Zone 2	39/6.2	22/3.5	32/5	29/4.6	106/16.8	111/17.6	183/29	234/37.1	271/43	235/37.2	631
Zone 3	64/6.9	43/4.6	39/4.2	61/6.5	166/17.8	176/18.9	294/31.5	340/36.5	369/39.6	312/33.5	932
NULL	4/4.6	4/4.6	4/4.6	6/6.9	17/19.5	13/15	27/31	33/37.9	35/40.2	31/35.6	87
Total	131	89	91	109	353	354	613	748	798	686	1986

Then, we analyzed the group of members who were not aware of the SI implemented by the PSO, taking into consideration their distance and the grading of the topics made by members (see Table 8).

We verified that the majority of the classifications were, regardless of the zone, mostly between “Good” and “Very good” on the Likert scale. We joined both the n and their percentages and we could observe that Zone 2 (up to 10 km) had the highest percentage in both categories (72% in DIVIN and 74.3% ARHC, respectively). Members who were aware of the SI carried out by the PSO ranked the topics higher (Table 9).

Subsequently, keeping the criteria for joining the classifications “Good” and “Very good” and according to the respective area of the residence of each member, we analyzed the variations in percentage points between the classifications for each topic. In members with awareness of SI, we observed that there was a tendency to rank according to the topic

in question. For the DIVIN topic, the tendency was to have only one direction for the classification “Very good” (+26.3 pp), with a clear predominance of members residing in Zone 2 (43%, +14 pp, see Table 9). For the ARHC topic, although not in such a strong way, there was an accentuated trend towards the classification “Good” (+12.8 pp), with a strong differentiation for Zone 1 members (42%, +9.9 pp) (see Table 10).

Table 8. No SI awareness.

Zone	Very Bad		Bad		Medium		Good		Very Good		Total
	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	DIVIN	AHRC	n
Zone 1	49/6.4	40/5.2	48/6.2	43/5.6	158/20.7	193/25.3	264/34.6	283/37.1	243/31.8	203/26.6	762
Zone 2	72/6.2	50/4.3	70/6.1	75/6.5	243/21.2	256/22.3	369/32.2	432/37.7	391/34.1	332/28.9	1145
Zone 3	103/6.5	76/6.5	99/6.3	103/8.9	335/21.3	341/29.7	514/32.7	575/36.6	519/33	475/30.2	1570
NULL	17/7.3	8/7.3	20/8.6	18/7.7	49/21.2	60/25.9	72/31.1	83/35.9	73/31.6	62/26.8	231
Total	241	174	237	239	705	850	1219	1373	1226	1072	3708

Table 9. SI/No SI awareness: distance versus DIVIN and ARHC on Good and Very good.

Zone	SI Awareness		No SI Awareness	
	DIVIN	ARHC	DIVIN	ARHC
	Good And Very Good	Good And Very Good	Good And Very Good	Good And Very Good
	n/%	n/%	n/%	n/%
Zone 1	232/69	249/74.1	507/66.4	486/63.7
Zone 2	454/72	469/74.3	760/66.3	764/65.9
Zone 3	663/71.1	652/70	1033/65.7	1050/66.8

Table 10. SI awareness: distance versus topics DIVIN and ARHC.

Zone	DIVIN n = 1349				ARHC n = 1370			
	Good	Very Good	Good	Very Good	Good	Very Good	Good	Very Good
	%	%	Delta	Delta	%	%	Delta	Delta
Zone 1	32.4	36.6		+4.2	42	32.1	+9.9	
Zone 2	29	43		+14	37.1	37.2		+0.1
Zone 3	31.5	39.6		+8.1	36.5	33.5	+3	
Total				+26.3			+12.8	

Delta% = variation in percentage points.

To test Hypothesis 4 (H4) and Hypothesis 5 (H5), the Kruskal–Wallis test was calculated, confirming there were no significant statistical differences between members’ location Zones and the performance level given to DIVIN and ARHC topics ($p > 0.05$) (Table 11).

Table 11. DIVIN and ARHC performance, by location.

SI Topics	Sig
DIVIN	0.260
ARHC	0.140

As for the DIVIN and ARHC topics, it should be noted that, regardless of the members’ area of residence (Zones 1, 2 or 3), those who were aware of the SI carried out by the

PSO mostly ranked the topics higher (Tables 8 and 10). This trend was materialized in the global analysis of both topics. In the DIVIN topic, the average of the “Good” and “Very good” ratings was 70.7% of members with awareness of SI versus 66.1%, and in the ARHC topic, the average was 72.8% versus 65.4% of members without SI awareness (Table 5). It also appears that there was a tendency for topics to be classified differently. The DIVIN topic had a dominant trend towards the “Very good” classification, being Zone 2 predominant. The ARHC topic leaned more towards “Good”, with Zone 1 being more prevalent (Table 10).

6. General Discussion

Approximately one third of the members (34.9%) were aware of the SI carried out by the PSO, corroborating other study outcomes [7,25]. Therefore, considering RQ1 “Are members aware of the SI programs implemented by the PSO?”, results from this study show that the majority of the PSO members were not aware. Since PSOs are credible in passing messages related to SI [14,52], these results confirm that, with regard to SI planning, communication and execution, there is still a long way to go [13,15].

With regard to the hypotheses of the study, it was possible to verify that there is congruence with the results presented in the descriptive statistics analysis. Thus, H1 is not confirmed. In this vein, the first contribution of this study is that, to the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study in which it is confirmed that distance has no impact on the awareness that members have about PSO SIs.

In fact, distance emerges as one element that brings members closer or further away from the sustainability initiatives carried out by the PSO. It is an element that positively or negatively influences the awareness (or lack of awareness) of the sustainability initiatives carried out. With regard to clubs, according to Francis, Norris, and Brinkmann (2017) [9], location is a pre-eminent element in terms of the club’s achievement of SI. The authors conclude that “The location and environment that these franchises are in tell a bit of the reason why some of the teams are making contributions to the sustainability movement” (p. 405). In our investigation, when members were aware of the SI, a greater distance corresponded to a greater awareness of the SI. This data can be interpreted as a way for members who are physically further away from the PSO to feel more connected with the PSO through greater awareness of the SI carried out. However, given the lack of awareness of the SI, at a greater distance it appears that the number of members who did not know of it was higher in percentage terms. Relating to RQ2 “What is the importance of distance on members SI awareness?”, in light of these results, and extending previous research [9], we can infer that distance is important as a sign of member connection with the PSO, namely positive when there is an awareness of the SI carried out. Previous studies prove that it is difficult to attract consumers to sustainable behaviors [53]. The absence or poor awareness of the SI carried out makes the process even more difficult, that is, “researchers should consider the degree to which consumers are aware of the current initiatives implemented by professional leagues and teams” (p. 45) [54]. In this regard, the second contribution to the literature is the positive importance of distance for members who have PSO SI awareness, because distance strengthens the members’ relationship with the PSO.

In addition to distance, awareness of the SI is also significant in the way members assess the topics considered (DIVIN and ARHC). With respect to RQ3: “How do the PSO members evaluate the topics DIVIN and AHRC?” and RQ4: “What is the relationship between members’ SI awareness and the assessment on the topics DIVIN and AHRC?”, although both topics were positively evaluated by all members (with and without awareness of the SI performed), there was a clear differentiation, positively, in the evaluation achieved by members with awareness of the SI implemented. The third contribution for the literature is member awareness of the SI implanted to evaluate the topics more positively, thus reinforcing the importance of member SI awareness. This finding requires a greater knowledge of consumer and sport subcultures [55], and PSOs should adapt the SI to the specificities of the sport and its consumers.

Finally, for RQ5: “What is the relationship between distance and the members’ assessment on the topics DIVIN and ARHC?”, considering the possible relationships that exist between the topics covered, awareness of the SI and the distance at which members are found, it is noteworthy that members who had awareness of the SI, in all areas, ranked the topics higher, as confirmed by H2 and H3. The results indicated that it is the members SI awareness, and not the defined zones (i.e., distance), that influences member evaluations carried out, as expressed by the disconfirmation of H4 and H5. The uniformity of the members’ assessment of the SI topics in question, and a better assessment compared with members without SI awareness, is in itself a relevant fact with regard to other studies already carried out. Therefore, it is not possible to establish a clear cause–effect relationship, as in the study of Dosumu, Colbeck and Bragg (2017) [19], where a league with a lower competitive level corresponded to an almost total percentage of pollution from transport used by fans to access the stadiums.

In order to assess the members’ responses to the SI performed by the PSO [56] among members with awareness of the SI, the classification of topics was performed differently and both topics are better evaluated when compared with the evaluation of members who were not aware of the SI. To this end, the fourth contribution reinforces the importance of members’ SI awareness and the (ir)relevance that distance has in the topic assessment. Extending the work of Wall-Tweedie and Nguyen (2018) [26] on models and types of relationships, there was a notable tendency for the topic with the highest external visibility (i.e., DIVIN) to be rated with a higher percentage of maximum ratings (i.e., “Very Good”), and the topic with the least external visibility (i.e., ARHC) had a greater tendency to be rated “Good”. Regardless of the awareness of the SI, there was a high rating on both topics, a fact that is not unrelated to the strong emotional connection to the PSO [57] as well as to the power members feel they have to influence performance [58]. However, the data indicate that, even among the members who were aware of the SI, there was an orientation in the evaluation assessed. Members rewarded the topic they are most knowledgeable about with a better rating. As for the relationship between awareness of the SI and the zones considered, the results achieved do not allow us to reach any reasoned conclusion, and further studies are needed “that can further help societies to make progress toward more sustainable patterns” [59].

7. Conclusions

In recent years, PSOs have been following a path with the aim of being more sustainable. The various initiatives carried out in terms of sustainability prove this. The need to communicate sustainability practices with stakeholders is not specific to sport but transversal to all areas of society [60]. The main findings of this study evidenciate being aware of the SI performed constitutes the most important element in PSO success in the sustainability domain. The results demonstrate that topics considered are rated most positively by members with SI awareness, with a higher rating for the topic with the highest external visibility (i.e., DIVIN). It was also possible to verify that distance positively influences only when there is SI awareness, reinforcing the above. We live in a time when the PSO’s digital communication channels are increasingly important in their relationship with their members. This research extends other studies and confirms that most members are unaware of the SI performed [7,24] and that their highest evaluation depends on their SI awareness. In this way, this study reinforces the importance of SI communication as well as the visibility of the topics covered. Like the value-based theories advocate (i.e., correct company behavior leads to greater growth prospects) [61], there is also a clear connection here between SI awareness and higher member evaluations of the PSO SI topics presented.

From a theoretical point of view, the research confirms insights regarding the SI effects of a PSO on their main stakeholders. In addition to the effective awareness that members have on PSO’s SI performed, the study contributed to a better understanding of distance impact on their SI awareness as well as to the relationship between the members’ topic evaluation

according to their residence zones. Regarding the PSO's SI promotion, there is a need for enhanced communication, with a special focus on the visibility of the topics presented.

From a managerial perspective, through a greater understanding of the elements described above, in defense of a more sustainable world where professional sports organizations have an important role, these findings may contribute to better decision-making at the individual (e.g., more sustainable behaviors at home) and organizational levels, (e.g., online marketing strategies such as more frequent communications or the involvement in gaming activities to reinforce relationships between members and PSOs). The members' SI awareness is the key point regarding the topic evaluation presented by PSO.

The PSO in question has more than one hundred thousand members, is made up of dozens of sports, operates in an estimated universe of many thousands of practitioners, and has millions of followers. The fact that it is a case study is a limitation. Additionally, like other researchers [14], we acknowledge a limitation in the circumstance that only members were considered for this study, and in future research other stakeholders must be heard (i.e., fans, adepts, sponsors, collaborators). Qualitative methods can be used in future studies in order to understand more deeply the thoughts of this type of consumer. Finally, carrying out a post-pandemic study is something that can be interesting to better comprehend decision-making and fan behavior with regard to SIs and the topics studied.

In addition to the innovative nature of the "distance" factor with regard to SI awareness, this is one of the few studies implemented outside of North America, and it can be applied to other sports organizations, namely to those in Asia and Europe, with the objective of enriching knowledge about an important area in today's society. In conclusion, this study consolidates the lack of awareness of PSO members and the SI performed and the relationship between the importance that members' awareness has on other factors for the success of an SI (e.g., distance and the topics of evaluation).

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