

Team Identity and Environmentalism: The Case of Forest Green Rovers

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Despite consumer concern over climate change, research on environmental issues and sport fandom has focused more on organizational outcomes than on fans themselves. Recognizing fandom can be representative of social movements, and social identity and collective action are utilized in an intrinsic case study of Forest Green Rovers football club supporters (who also identify with environmentalism) to understand the extent to which the club represents a social movement, and whether Forest Green Rovers' sustainability efforts encourage pro-environment actions. Through interview research, we found supporters' team and environmental identities cooperate synergistically. Forest Green Rovers is not just representative of environmentalism but has become a politicized identity itself—a means to act for change on environmental issues. We discuss implications concerning identity synergy, team identity as a politicized identity, perceptions of success, collective action, and cognitive alternatives to the status quo. We conclude by noting the unavoidable inseparability of environmental issues and sport consumption.

Keywords: climate, consumer behavior, environment, fans, social identity

People are more concerned about environmental issues today than ever (Deloitte, 2020), and polling indicates consumer concerns are impacting businesses. In a 2023 global survey of consumers, six in 10 agreed businesses will fail customers if they do not act to address climate change (Ipsos, 2023). In 2022, one in three United Kingdom consumers indicated they had stopped purchasing certain brands or products due to ethical or sustainability concerns (Deloitte, 2022). In sport, polling from YouGov suggests that while only one-third of football fans identify as environmentalists, more than half support brands engaging with social issues (Dundas, 2022). Still, amidst growing consumer concern within and outside of sport for environmental issues, governments have been slow to endorse policy change, increasing the likelihood for social movements demanding change (Wright et al., 2020).

Inquiry into environmental issues and sport consumer behavior has focused on the pressure organizations feel from fans to implement environmental sustainability initiatives (Todaro et al., 2023) and how to promote pro-environmental behaviors at games and in everyday life (Casper et al., 2020; McCullough & Trail, 2023; Trail & McCullough, 2021). Critically, these studies do not address the influence of environmental issues “on sport fans

themselves.” While understanding organizational outcomes of fan behaviors can inform business practices, examining fan experiences that lead to such behaviors is vital. Indeed, in addition to government and business responsibility, most consumers feel personally responsible for taking action to address climate change (Ipsos, 2023). As consumers take inventory of their behaviors, there is no reason to believe this would not extend to sport consumption.

Scholars have noted the potential for sport fandom to be representative of social movements in certain settings, which may considerably change fans' identity in terms of meaning and associated advocacy (Delia, 2020). Given that environmentalism is a known social movement (Mackay et al., 2021) and, thus, linked to matters of collective action and social change (Klandermans, 2014), this leads to a critical question: In the case of environmental issues, to what extent do organizational efforts and consumer concerns over addressing climate change (re)shape sport fandom?

To explore this question, we draw from social identity and collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008, 2018) to study fans who identify with the world's most environmentally conscious sport organization, the Forest Green Rovers (FGR) Football Club, who also identify with environmentalism, as an intrinsic case study (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). Doing so allows us to examine these identities in tandem, in a setting where both the team and fans are committed to addressing environmental issues, revealing the potential of collective action in this domain. Such inquiry contributes to the growing body of literature on team identity and collective action (Delia, 2020; Delia, James, & Want, 2022) while also acknowledging consumer concern over environmental issues (Deloitte, 2020, 2022; Ipsos, 2023). Utilizing an interpretive approach, we asked the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: Among FGR fans who identify with environmentalism, to what extent does the team identity represent a social movement (environmentalism)?


RQ2: Among FGR fans who identify with environmentalism, to what extent are FGR's sustainability practices associated with fans' pro-environment actions in the rest of their lives?

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Discernibly, not all sport fans identify with environmentalism, and as such, our study findings and theoretical implications should not be extended to sport fans generally.

This study was driven by our collective personal and professional interests. All authors identify as sport fans and are environmentally conscious; we regularly engage with these identities as we support teams and athletes and seek ways to minimize our environmental footprint in our everyday lives. Two of us research sport fan identity, while the other studies sport ecology. These qualities drew us closer to those we studied, deepening the richness of our data. Still, we practiced reflexivity throughout the study via a heightened self-awareness of our personal experiences and professional knowledge (Probst & Berenson, 2014).

Theoretical Background

Social Identity Approach and Collective Action

Given our research focuses on identity and social change within the case studied, we use the social identity approach (SIA) and collective action as theoretical bases for the study. SIA posits social groups are contextual and fluid, influenced by historical, cultural, and economic circumstances (Reicher, 2004) and thus carry sociocultural and sociohistorical meaning. Group identities representative of a social movement organization—also known as politicized identities—are strongly linked to collective action in pursuit of change (Klandermans, 2014; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). As Van Zomeren et al. (2018) noted, “unlike broader and vaguer group identities, a politicized identity includes clear normative and action-oriented meaning” (p. 125). Collective action is likely to occur when group boundaries are impermeable, dominant group superiority is considered illegitimate, and an alternative to the status quo is plausible (Reicher, 2004). It is important to note that social identity, in relation to collective action and change, is equally about “what could be” (i.e., cognitive alternatives, e.g., Reicher & Haslam, 2012) as it is about the status quo (e.g., Reicher, 2004). For those with pro-environment group identities, cognitive alternatives could include “imagining how humans could form a more sustainable and harmonious relationship with the rest of nature” (Mackay et al., 2021).

Because of their greater responsibility to partake in social movements, groups holding politicized identities are more likely than those with nonpoliticized identities to take collective action toward change (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). In this study, we consider individuals’ identification with environmentalism a politicized identity (Mackay et al., 2021). Politicized environmental identities (e.g., identifying with environmentalism) are linked to participation in pro-environment collective action (Schulte et al., 2020). Further, this identity is incidentally (rather than structurally) disadvantaged by those in power pursuing the status quo in relation to environmental matters—that is, whereas structural disadvantage focuses on those discriminated against based on existing social group membership (e.g., women and ethnic minorities), incidental disadvantage addresses issue-based disadvantage, where a group identity must form around the issue (Van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Team Identity and Psychological Meaning

Scholars apply tenets of SIA to the study of sport fans via team identity (Lock & Heere, 2017), which suggests individuals draw a sense of self from the perceived awareness, value, and emotional significance of belonging to a group (Hornsey, 2008). The team identity literature is vast, with most scholars focusing on team

identity in relation to organization-related outcomes (Lock & Heere, 2017). Others have endeavored to understand the nature of team identity, such as its development, meaning, maintenance, and relation to other identities (Delia & James, 2018; Doyle et al., 2017; Lock & Funk, 2016). Concerning the relationship between team identity and other identities, scholars have mainly focused on sport-related identities, such as fan supporter groups or other team-related subgroups (Lock & Funk, 2016). While this line of research adds insight into the particularities of one’s identification with a team (and other team-related groups), it does not address team identity in relation to nonsport identities, nor does it address the (psychological) meaning associated with a team identity or what a team may symbolize.

Concerning team identity meaning (a key aspect of RQ1), scholars have noted that teams are representative of their communities (Heere & James, 2007). From a psychological meaning (e.g., Fournier, 1991) perspective, a team’s representativeness (or meaning) anchors one’s connection with a team (Delia & James, 2018). This anchor is often a city, state, or region where a team is based (place or geographic identity; e.g., Delia & James, 2018), but theoretically, teams could also symbolize other demographic identities (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and social class) or even religious or political identities (Heere & James, 2007). In this vein, scholars have observed that certain sport teams may represent or be symbolic of other communities (i.e., in terms of the team’s psychological meaning), such as social movements or politicized identities (Delia, 2020).

In research with Women’s National Basketball Association Minnesota Lynx fans, Delia (2020) found that, among fans interviewed, the team was representative of a social movement—the women’s rights movement. Gender equality was a primary anchor of team identity, providing it stability. In related work, Delia, James, and Want (2022) found that team identity can be a community for social justice, further supporting the notion of team identity connecting to social movements and collective action. Finally, Guest and Luijten’s (2018) research with National Women’s Soccer League Portland Thorns fans demonstrated the potential for teams to symbolize LGBTQ rights. Collectively, these studies provide evidence that, in certain settings, sport fandom (and related group identities) can be representative of a social movement. In this study, we seek to add to this understanding by exploring the experiences of individuals who identify with a team and environmentalism.

Method

Our study is aligned with interpretivism, prioritizing understanding and interpretation (Markula & Silk, 2011). We used an intrinsic case study methodology to deeply examine a particular case of interest (Hodge & Sharp, 2016). Using the case of FGR, we conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals who identified with (1) FGR and (2) environmentalism. This approach allowed us the flexibility to understand and discuss participants’ unique lived experiences while also utilizing the literature to construct questions (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

The case of FGR is unique. This aligns with intrinsic case study research, which “is undertaken because, first and last, one wants a better understanding of this particular case” (Stake, 2003, p. 445). Intrinsic case studies are not conducted because they represent other cases, but instead because the case itself (and those living the case) is of particular interest (Hodge & Sharp, 2016; Stake, 2003). As global entities such as the United Nations and World Health Organization sound alarms about and act related to

climate change, the sport industry is not immune from such considerations. Indeed, widespread sport entity interest in the United Nations' Sports for Climate Action Initiative illustrates the criticality of environmental issues in the sport domain ([United Nations Climate Change, 2024](#)). As such, examining the impact of FGR's holistic approach to addressing environmental issues among supporters should be deeply informative for the array of sport organizations committing to climate action.

Study Context

Founded in 1889, FGR is based in Nailsworth, England, within Stroud District, an area known to support climate change issues. Stroud District Council declared a climate emergency in 2018, and the district aims to be carbon neutral by 2030 ([Loveridge, 2022](#)). FGR compete in the English Football League One,¹ the fourth highest division in professional men's English football. Spurred by investment from green energy entrepreneur Dale Vince in 2010, FGR brands itself as the world's greenest football club. FGR is the first and only vegan football club, and the first football club to be certified carbon neutral by the United Nations ([FGR Climate Study, 2021](#)). The team has many environmental initiatives that reduce its impact on the natural environment including kits made from recycled plastic and bamboo waste, sourcing 100% renewable energy, and sustainable turf management using no pesticides and organic fertilizers ([Papp-Vary & Farkas, 2022](#)). While most sport organizations implement some of these initiatives, FGR has taken the lead in their comprehensive approach to being an environmentally sustainable team to the point where the United Nations recognized the club as the most environmentally sustainable sport organization in the world ([FGR Climate Study, 2021](#)). In 2021, FGR began using pitch-side light-emitting diode advertising boards to share information on the climate crisis ([Fisher, 2021](#)), and the club has plans for an all-wooden stadium as part of a proposed Eco Park development ([Hall, 2022](#)). As sport organizations worldwide increasingly seek to address environmental issues ([United Nations Climate Change, 2024](#)), FGR represents a central case to study.

Procedure

The FGR Supporters Club assisted us with recruitment by sharing a link to a preinterview screening questionnaire. To qualify, individuals had to self-identify with (1) FGR and (2) environmentalism. The FGR Supporters Club estimates about 90% of FGR fans are supportive of the club's environmental values. We sought to interview FGR fans who attended club matches, as they would have firsthand experience with FGR's sustainability practices. As such, only individuals residing in Great Britain were recruited to participate in an interview.

The first author conducted all interviews in September 2022. To minimize financial costs and the environmental footprint of the study, interviews were conducted via Zoom. All participants received a £25 gift card for participating in the research. Interviews began with discussion of the individual's identification with FGR and with environmentalism, in terms of psychological meaning. Subsequently, we discussed the two identities in tandem (e.g., the experience and potential uniqueness of FGR's pro-environment alignment, environmental sustainability as part of their fandom, perceptions of contributing to change). Interviews averaged 49 min and were conducted until saturation ([Smith & Sparkes, 2016](#)), resulting in 20 participants. Each interview was recorded on Zoom; audio recordings and Otter AI transcriptions were retained for

analysis. The third author reviewed automated transcriptions alongside recorded interviews to ensure verbatim transcription; this required significant editing (often, retranscribing), likely due to thick accents and/or background noise ([Heinrichs, 2024](#)).

Participants

Sixteen men and four women participated in the study. All participants were White, their average age was 53 (range 18–75 years old), and they had an average annual household income of £44,000 (range £12,000–100,000). Three participants had completed secondary education, two had completed further education, nine held a higher education degree, and six held a university postgraduate degree. Eighteen identified as heterosexual, one as bisexual, and one indicated they preferred not to label their sexual orientation. Despite our efforts to recruit a diverse sample, compared with census data ([Office for National Statistics, 2022](#)) for the Stroud Local Authority District (in which FGR is located), our participants were older, had higher education levels, slightly above average income, and a much higher proportion of men. The proportion of White participants is in line with census data, as is the number of participants who identified as heterosexual. Our shortcomings highlight the difficulty in recruiting diverse participants in sport fan research, and in sharing them, we hope to improve transparency in participant demographic data ([Delia, Melton, et al., 2022](#)). Concerning FGR, duration of fandom ranged from 1 to 24 years. While nine participants lived within 30 min of the club and an additional four lived within an hour, others lived further away; two participants lived within 2 hr of the club, and five lived more than 2 hr from the club.

Analysis

Data for analysis included interview recordings (972 min) and transcripts (146,801 words). The first author led analysis, using thematic analysis ([Braun et al., 2016](#)) to analyze the data. After data familiarization, the data were analyzed in two phases: first, a data-driven coding phase with a heightened focus on participant experiences; and second, a theory-driven theme development phase, where codes from the data-driven phase were considered alongside the literature to generate higher order themes that answer the RQs. In doing so, we took a primarily semantic approach, focusing on explicitly stated thoughts and experiences, while periodically using a latent focus on implicit ideas supporting participants' ideas.

In the first phase of analysis, the author focused on participants' experiences as FGR fans, environmentalists, and the intersection of the two through deep immersion with the data ([MacLure, 2008](#)). Data were considered first on an individual basis, to understand each participant's unique experiences. Then, to identify patterns (or lack thereof), data were analyzed on a collective basis. In this phase, 39 data-driven codes were created around individuals' support of FGR and environmentalism. Examples of the data-driven codes include advertising, club growth, community impact, Dale Vince, environmentalism actions, club ethos, fandom duration, FGR uniqueness, pride, talking to others, and vegan. Following the data-driven phase of analysis, a theory-driven phase of analysis incorporated literature in line with the theoretical framework for the study, along with mindfulness of the research purpose. Theory-driven themes developed in this phase included: identity meaning, socializing with others, fandom representative of environmentalism, fandom bigger than football, fandom fits with lifestyle, sustainability versus winning, and fandom contributing to

change; collectively, these themes connect to theory in terms of team identity, meaning, and representativeness, as well as collective action. Acknowledging the active process of thematic analysis, after theme refinement and naming, we arrived at the final set of themes (and subthemes): cooperative identities (fandom fits with lifestyle, supporting more than football, and varied perceptions of success) and fandom contributing to change (changing habits or behaviors, increasing others' environmental consciousness).

Given the interpretivist orientation of our study, we used a relativist approach to evaluate the research with study-specific evaluative criteria (Burke, 2016). Unlike criteriological approaches that aim for universal criteria to evaluate quality in qualitative research, those using relativist approaches favor evaluative criteria that are context-specific, flexible, and concerned with study-as-a-whole rigor in addition to quality in method (see, e.g., Burke, 2016; Smith & McGannon, 2018). Our criteria included: topic worthiness in terms of theoretical and practical significance, as well as timeliness; rich rigor in choosing a study context, recruitment approach, and method well-suited to address the RQs; methodological coherence in the alignment of the study purpose with the theoretical framework, method, and case, and findings (Tracy, 2010); comprehensiveness of evidence (quotations shared) to demonstrate interview quality (Sparkes, 2002); and sincerity of the research team via reflexivity (Richardson, 2000).

Results and Theoretical Discussion

Although all participants identified with FGR and environmentalism, their identification with each developed and looked different. Regarding FGR, about half of supporters had begun supporting the club 10 or more years ago because it was their local football club, while the other half began following FGR more recently because of its pro-environment actions. Concerning environmentalism, some participants indicated their focus is on energy or veganism, while others practice a holistic approach to environmentalism. Regardless, it was a long-held identity for nearly all participants—all but one participant had identified with environmentalism longer than identifying with FGR. Perhaps a result of identifying with environmentalism for some time, many participants spoke about environmental issues with concern and a sense of urgency, or what Adam referred to as “green anxiety.”

Despite differences among participants, all of them considered FGR's sustainability efforts to be part of the club. Louis, a 20-plus year FGR supporter, noted the infusion of environmental sustainability into the club as a “happy coincidence.” Essentially, regardless of when or how they became FGR supporters, participants embraced environmental sustainability as part of their fandom, in terms of the team's psychological meaning (Delia & James, 2018). Participants' support of FGR eases their environmental concerns, providing a community supportive of environmental issues, which participants described as warm, calm, feeling like a hug, or as Grace noted, “like being in a little cocoon,” which subsequently encourages them to take additional pro-environment actions away from the stadium.

In this section, we utilize verbatim quotes (referring to participants by pseudonym) considerably to build a narrative of participants' experiences and demonstrate breadth and depth in our findings, first regarding FGR representing the environmental movement (RQ1), and second, support for FGR encouraging pro-environment actions among participants (RQ2). We engage in theoretical discussion following each of these areas to link findings with the literature.

Cooperative Identities (RQ1)

Taken together, participants' FGR and environmentalism identities are cooperative in that one supports the other and, at times, the two are enmeshed. As Caleb noted, “It's like my attachment to the club is also my attachment to that [environmentalism].” This, they recognize, is something unique. As David noted, “I suppose, I mean, what is unique about Forest Green, is that, is our identity is so political.” Similarly, Alice commented on FGR being “the greenest football club in the world,” and how, “I think I'm proud that I'm associated with them . . . because they've got that.” Acknowledging these cooperative identities, participants discussed the ways in which their FGR fandom fits with their lifestyle, how club support means supporting more than football, and the extent to which on-field success is prioritized compared with sustainability efforts.

Fandom Fits With Lifestyle

Fundamental to participants' FGR and environmentalism identities cooperating is recognition that their support of FGR fits with their lifestyle as environmentalists. As James said:

To see a transparent ethical club, you know, sourcing food from the right places, genuinely caring about the community where the- where things come from, it just rings- just resonates with the way I feel, my morals, my moral compass, I guess as well. Like that's something that's quite refreshing.

Joseph, an avid runner, noted how his FGR support fits well with other groups he is part of. He shared, “I mean, I'm also, I'm a member of a vegan runners, which is the running group in the UK. So, that's why I sort of identify with them in sport.” George remarked similarly on FGR aligning with other aspects of his life, “You know, green sports, it makes me feel like I'm even more kind of aligned to them because they match a lot of the things that I'm interested in.” Leo stressed the significance of his fandom aligning with his passion for living sustainably:

You know, we all have one common goal, which is kind of to live sustainably, or should be to live sustainably. So, identifying with something which I love, such as football, um, that kind of incorporates that into of two loves of my life into one is really, you know, quite important to me.

Of course, because the identities fit so well together, for some participants, continued support of FGR hinges on the club's environmental sustainability efforts. Olivia, who had followed FGR for 5 years and was primarily a supporter due to environmental reasons, commented, “The joy that I've had of supporting them, the last four or five years has been great, but if they suddenly started serving meat, they would be no different from any other football club and so that would be it.” Thus, while participants' FGR fandom fitting with their lifestyle was mainly overwhelmingly positive, some recognized the delicacy of their link to the club, should FGR discontinue their support of environmental issues.

Supporting More Than Football

In describing their FGR fandom and its enmeshing with environmentalism, many participants commented on the club ethos, and how support of FGR feels like support of more than a football club. As Henry said:

You go to Forest Green Rovers, it's a lot more than a football match. You know, it's about the pitch, um it's about the

players, it's about the ethos and um . . . it broadens your interest in what is basically a football team because it's got all these other issues bolted onto it.

This, as many participants noted, stands in contrast to other football clubs they follow or are familiar with. As Samuel remarked:

It's almost unusual for a football team to have such a clear mission statement and to have, such an, uh, obvious and easily communicated end goal um of, you know, of, of spreading the sustainability message, um, throughout the sport.

Participants were aware of the uniqueness of FGR and their fandom, understanding it is linked to a social movement. For example, Miles said:

It's a case of this is saying something more. It's just saying, 'I'm still supporting football, um, but I'm supporting a club that's, that's got more than football at its heart.' It's got, it's got your health, your future, your environment. Um, it's just saying there's more important things to football, but football is still very, very important and it is because a lot of people, um, enjoy their weekends, their stay [at the grounds]. So, for me, it's just been a part of a movement and a football team at the same time.

Despite FGR's distinctiveness, participants were generally hopeful that other clubs or supporters might join the pro-environment movement. As Charles said, "I'd like to think we're setting up a model on the environmental aspects that could be followed by every club, and every business." David noted the openness of the movement, stating, "You know, it's a, you know, it's open to anyone. You don't have to be Catholic or Protestant, or Irish, or Republican, or whatever. You know, you can, you can join."

Considering the impression of FGR's ethos on fans' identity, several participants noted they believe their fandom is amplified as a result. For example, Kate shared, "If you take the environmentalism and the football, I think the experience of supporting the team is actually almost like more than the sum of those two parts." For Kate, who grew up in Glasgow and had very negative experiences with football from an early age given the sectarian divide between Celtic Football Club and Rangers Football Club, FGR has given her the opportunity to be a football fan and feel good about it. She explained:

I have very, very negative, um, thoughts and experiences of being a football supporter because it was all about it, um, it was about, you know, the sectarian side of things as well. Um, so, for, for someone like me to be able to go along to support a team that is also doing—that so obviously promotes and supports diversity, um and promotes and supports environmental causes—you know, so, actually sends out good messages, I suppose, and makes the world a better place, as opposed to my early experiences, which were the opposite of that Because for all of my childhood, um, I had to do what I could to not be identified with one or the other teams because of the fear of what would happen if the people who were trying to find out, you know, so I spent a lot of time, um, setting myself apart from any football team.

Taken together, participants expressed support for FGR's clear agenda for environmental change and their recognition of this as a unique social movement. This, tied to their fandom, allows them to realize support for a club that is doing more than playing football.

Varied Perceptions of Success

Perhaps a result of FGR representing environmentalism, most participants noted that success on the pitch (i.e., winning matches) is less important. Two participants (Charles and Louis) explicitly expressed that success on the pitch takes priority—of note, these participants had supported the club for over 20 years. When asked whether he believes on-field success or the club's environmental sustainability efforts are more important, Charles said, "Winning obviously," later explaining that while environmental sustainability is important to him, he would support the club without it. For Louis, there was more hesitance:

Ultimately, I'd probably fall on the side of the club's success . . . like I say, first and foremost, I'm a football fan. And want—everyone wants their club to be um, successful. You know, that's why you play games It's a difficult decision. 51/49%. Ideally, I'll have both. Thank you very much.

For most participants, however, environmental sustainability was prioritized over on-pitch success. For some, there was no hesitation. Samuel noted, "It [environmental sustainability] is 100%, it is the reason why I got involved and it's, and it's, uh, pivotal to my ongoing support of the club." David, a 14-year FGR supporter, explained, "If they were relegated seven times, I would still keep supporting them," but emphasized, "if they started investing in fossil fuel and . . . then I would probably, would stop supporting them."

For others, consideration of what they prioritize in their identifying with FGR caused a bit more reflection on club success in general, compared with addressing environmental issues. For example, George shared:

I mean, it's a funny thing, isn't it, following a sports team. It doesn't really, when you kind of, break it down, it doesn't really mean much, you know? It's not life or death. It's not . . . it's not, it's not that important when you think about it. And teams do well, they win things, and then it just gets forgotten. It goes into history. It becomes club history . . . so, not really affecting you on a kind of daily basis. It's a nice feeling, I guess, to know that your team has won. It's not really affecting you. Whereas, the environmental side is, is obviously very much affecting you. It's the future of your life on Earth, basically. So, um, it's, it's in that sense, it's much more important than whatever's happening in sport.

A subset of participants shared that while they personally prioritize FGR's environmental sustainability efforts over on-pitch success, they believe some level of on-pitch success is needed to advance the progressive ideas of the club—to impact change. Miles commented, "The more they can get up [promoted], to there, the more they draw attention to the plight of the um, the planet basically, and why they are what they are." William noted the need for the team to have some level of success to be talked about:

If they are successful and move to the league, then the eco-credential side of it will be talked about a lot more than if they weren't successful. So, it—to me personally, it doesn't matter who wins the game of football, as long as it's a really good game of football. If it's two goals to one, and my team is the team with one, I'm not that worried as long as it's a good game. But I like Forest Green being successful, as I said, because people talk about it and say, "oh, Forest Green, yeah they're, they're the vegan Football Club," and stuff like that.

Similarly, Adam remarked on how on-pitch success can bring legitimacy to the club, which he believes is necessary for media coverage and getting the message out:

I think that [environmental] message is more important than the day-to-day winning of matches. But um obviously, we've got to win matches to be able to have a voice if that makes sense as well. So, there's that connection. If we were not in the Football League, if we were a non-league team and we hadn't got promoted, none of this media . . . uh, media stories would have got out we'd still be, "oh, they're not winning matches, they're a Kooky club. They're run like this. They're obviously not that good. It obviously doesn't work because they don't win matches." So, you almost . . . the message is bigger, but you need them to win the matches to be able to get the message out.

Theoretical Discussion (RQ1)

Collectively, participants' identification with FGR and environmentalism cooperates in a way that allows them to support a football club while also supporting a social movement they care deeply about. For these supporters, FGR is environmentalism in the sport realm—it is a means to practice and promote environmentalism through sport consumption. As such, for many participants, match outcomes are less critical than they would be if the club was not linked to the environmental movement. These findings allow us to offer the following theoretical contributions: (1) the potential for identity synergy (Fombelle et al., 2012) between team identity and another (nonsport) identity; (2) team identity as a politicized identity (not just representative of a social movement; Delia, 2020), where, as a result of identity synergy, a team identity can become a means for collective action toward social change; and (3) problematizing the notion of team success among fans (Lock et al., 2023) in settings where team identity is linked to a social movement.

Identity Synergy

Researchers have noted that sport fandom (as a group identity) may align with and become representative of a social movement (Delia, 2020). For FGR supporters in our study, it was clear their identification with FGR meant more than supporting a football club—because of FGR's sustainability efforts, support of the club is representative of environmentalism. This adds support to the notion of sport teams and fans contributing to social change via collective action around social movements (Delia 2020; Delia, James, & Want, 2022), specifically by noting that a team's representativeness can extend to the environmental movement.

Participants' identification with FGR and environmentalism cooperate in a way that allows them to practice their fandom without fear or anxiety of it conflicting with their views as environmentalists. Further, participants repeatedly discussed their fandom being something "more than football," and greater than the sum of the two identities. This suggests a synergy of sorts, where one identity (FGR fandom) allows for the enactment of another (environmentalism). Scholars have discussed identity synergy in marketing (Fombelle et al., 2012), where one group identity allows for the pursuit of others. As Fombelle et al. (2012) noted:

When members feel that their engagement with an organization provides synergy with another identity, they are likely to feel the organization positively affects their enactment of that identity, gives them opportunity to grow in that identity, and facilitates their pursuit of the identity. (p. 591)

Participants' synergized identities as FGR supporters and environmentalists appear to allow both to remain salient as they engage with the club. In turn, this likely strengthens their identification with FGR because their support for the club allows them to pursue two passions simultaneously—football and the environment. This synergy may be facilitated by FGR's unapologetic approach to aligning wholly with environmentalism, aligning with Trail and McCullough's (2021) inquiry into fans' environmental values, suggesting unabashedly embracing environmentalism may be as effective as modest approaches.

It is quite feasible that identity synergy occurs in sport settings where teams, leagues, or athletes are representative of broad social movements or politicized identities—this phenomenon likely extends beyond FGR and environmentalism. Further, certain sport settings may provide opportunities for the enactment of multiple politicized identities. For example, the Oakland Roots and Soul soccer clubs forthrightly support climate, gender, and racial justice. In such instances, identity synergy via a team identity plus multiple politicized identities could lead to rich theoretical insights concerning the study of team identity, politicized identity, and identity synergy (or lack thereof). Scholars should examine other settings to understand the parameters of identity synergy and politicized identity in a sport fan context.

Team Identity as a Politicized Identity

Identity synergy does not require one or both identities to be related to a politicized identity. However, findings from participants in our study suggest that identity synergy may amplify the potential for collective action related to social change. Politicized identities are great indicators for participation in social movements and collective action toward change generally (Van Zomeren et al., 2018) and related to the environment specifically (Schulte et al., 2020). Environmentalism is a politicized identity (Mackay et al., 2021), and, because of FGR's holistic approach to promoting environmental sustainability, participants' identity as FGR supporters is also politicized. Thus, identity synergy between participants' FGR and environmentalist identities appears to allow for the enactment of two politicized identities in tandem, creating the potential for greater effects in terms of pursuing change in this domain.

While scholars have noted certain settings may allow a team identity to be symbolic of a social movement (Delia, 2020), our findings among FGR supporters in this study point to the potential for a team (via team identity and identity synergy) to become a social group to advocate for change. That is, for some fans, it is possible that a team's connectedness to a social movement can contribute to the team itself becoming a politicized identity. Given that environmentalism is associated with an incidental (i.e., issue-based) rather than structural disadvantage, identification with a group that seeks to address the issue is critical for collective action. As Van Zomeren et al. (2008) noted:

In response to incidental disadvantage people need to develop a shared social identity that revolves around their common fate (i.e., the situation or issue), whereas in the case of structural disadvantage such an identity is usually a historical or socio-structural given. (p. 509)

Among FGR supporters we interviewed, we found exactly this—although all participants identify with environmentalism generally, FGR has become a pro-environment group (Mackay et al., 2021) through which supporters can seek change on environmental issues.

This demonstrates the significance of team identity beyond its ability to create a sense of community and influence organizational outcomes (Lock & Heere, 2017). Although it undoubtedly will not occur in all settings, the politicization of a team identity aligns with the theorization of social identity as a vehicle for social change (Hornsey, 2008) and collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). The potential for fan group identities to be a politicized identity need not be limited to superordinate team identity; fan subgroups (Lock & Funk, 2016) could form around their collective support for a team and a social movement organization (politicized identity). For example, Major League Soccer Minnesota United's Red Loons (fair labor) and English Premier League Manchester United's Rainbow Devils (LGBTQ+ community) are football supporters clubs with a central focus on social movements.

Varying Views of Success

As noted, we observed that most participants had a unique approach to thinking about FGR's success, wherein winning matches was less important than environmental pursuits. This aligns with the notion of evaluating group identity on alternative dimensions (e.g., Reichl, 1997) and adds to the growing literature supporting this phenomenon (e.g., Delia, 2020; Doyle et al., 2017; Mansfield et al., 2020). Scholars have mostly studied alternative team identity evaluations in the absence of on-field success (e.g., a losing season). In this study, participants were interviewed after FGR had recently been promoted—relative to the club's history, they had had substantial recent on-field success. Thus, on-field success should have been quite relevant.

Researchers have questioned the meaning of success, recognizing scholars should not assume what success is (and is not) among sport fans (Lock et al., 2023). In this study, we found that perceptions of success among FGR supporters were not limited to performance on the pitch. In fact, for most, club success was measured first by lives impacted concerning environmental matters and industry practices changed. Thus, while others have suggested fans may evaluate team identity on alternative dimensions in the absence of on-field success (e.g., Doyle et al., 2017; Mansfield et al., 2020), it appears certain sport settings may encourage alternative evaluations of success regardless of on-field performance. In such instances, on-field success may be supplementary to other measures of success. This problematizes traditional views of team success in relation to fandom (i.e., on-field performance) and indicates a need for empirical inquiry into complexity in the meaning of success among sport fans.

Fandom Contributing to Change (RQ2)

In general, participants were quite aware of how much FGR's environmental sustainability efforts have shaped them. Because nearly all participants had identified with environmentalism for some time, most discussed how FGR has not hugely impacted them in their lives, but rather, the club fits with their pro-environment lifestyle (as noted previously). Still, participants did indicate that FGR had some impact on their lives, as well as on others, which in turn contributes to change. As James said, "I like to think they are a pioneering-club, aren't they? And I'm a very, very, very, very small part of that by supporting them." This felt impact primarily manifested in two ways: (1) changing habits or behaviors and (2) providing a platform to make others more conscious of environmental issues.

Changing Habits or Behaviors

Although nearly all participants had identified with environmentalism before supporting FGR, most indicated their support of the

club had led them to make changes in their everyday lives. For example, Theo mentioned using leftover dishwater to water his yard, linking this routine to FGR's use of rainwater to water the pitch. Samuel noted the club's influence in his decision to purchase an electronic vehicle. David tried soy milk—something he previously disliked—in his tea at an FGR match, and now drinks it regularly. In discussing these relatively small changes, participants noted that seeing FGR's sustainable actions makes them think they can do it too. For example, Alice said, "The creative way that they have done things to try and reduce resources and things like that, you think actually, that is possible."

Beyond observing FGR's environmental practices and mimicking them in their own lives, several participants commented on FGR introducing them to other organizations (typically club sponsors) aligned with environmentalism. This has expanded fans' knowledge base in terms of organizations committed to a green agenda, coming from a trusted source in FGR. After discussing Sea Shepherd, a marine conservation organization and FGR sponsor, James said, "the fact that they do align with the football club [FGR], you kind of feel they've been vetted almost beforehand. They are, you know, worthwhile, they are legitimate." Club sponsors provide an additional means to learn about environmentally friendly practices. For example, Kate learned about a carbon offset organization via FGR:

One of the sponsors, or partners of FGR is, um, I think it's called SKOOT, which is an app where you can offset your CO2 emissions by logging your journeys on the app, so you feel as though at least you can sort of compensate a little bit for, um, the damage that you're doing.

Others mentioned learning about and trialing with other FGR sponsors, such as Bolt, Quorn, and Oatly. Thus, it was evident that participants recognized FGR sponsors not just as businesses providing financial support to the club, but as organizations aligned with the same movement they are committed to. As Charles said, "it engages you more through the sponsorship."

For two participants (Henry and Jack), FGR had a more pronounced impression on their daily routines—they attribute their present-day identification with environmentalism to FGR. Henry, a 15-year FGR supporter, began identifying with the environmental movement via the club's work related to environmental sustainability. He shared:

Forest Green Rovers started it [identifying with environmentalism] It's all the right way to go because it makes you think. You know, it makes you think about grass! It makes you think about the food, it makes you think about what people in the place are wearing. You know, and, and things you wouldn't normally think about, going to a football match.

Jack, a 14-year supporter, noted that environmentalism was something he has thought about more as he has gotten older, with FGR playing a pivotal role in a large lifestyle change:

I myself went vegan, oh, four years ago now, um and obviously the club is a vegan football club. So, whenever you're at the venue, whether that can be just as a supporter, dine in the supporter's club bars or the kiosks getting your food, or whether it's corporate hospitality, you are only eating vegan, you are only drinking vegan beer, vegan wine. Um, so, I'd probably say that was a—Forest Green Rovers were a big step in me becoming a vegan. There were health reasons as

well, I'm very sporty and I was told you can be even fitter and healthier, try a plant-based diet. Um, so it was a mixture of . . . if it wasn't for Forest Green Rovers, I gotta be, be honest, I probably wouldn't have been really introduced to um, you know, becoming a vegan. Like um, if it wasn't for that, I don't think the exposure was that great and I probably wouldn't have made the step.

Support of FGR has encouraged participants to take pro-environment actions in terms of habits or behaviors. For some, this has meant significant life changes (e.g., becoming vegan) whereas for others, it has involved small changes to everyday behaviors (e.g., recycling dishwater).

Increasing Others' Environmental Consciousness

Beyond FGR's effect on them personally, nearly all participants discussed how FGR has provided them a platform to make others (e.g., family, friends, and neighbors) more conscious of environmental issues. Sometimes, this means taking friends or family to matches. As Caleb said, "I've sort of got, like, a few of my friends like to go to matches occasionally and things like that. And I—I'd say that it's probably made them think more about their environmental decisions as well." Other times, it entails simply talking to people about FGR. Theo noted, "I'm always talking about them." Alice shared, "I mean, I would talk to people about it as well, you know, so if somebody's talking about FGR, I would talk to it along, not just the playing, but also the green agenda." Henry discussed his "charging points" that he uses when talking to others about the club. In explaining a conversation with a neighbor, he said:

He [neighbor] knows that I'm a FGR supporter. And I said, you know, why I'm a FGR supporter: because one, it's a good football team, two, because of the issues to do with, I go through the issues to do with, um, organic pitch, vegan food, sustainable clothes, not using leather products. I go through all that stuff.

Many participants recognized that the nature of FGR—a football club—opened the door to conversations with others they might not normally feel comfortable discussing environmental issues with. For Kate, who had not previously supported football clubs due to her dark memories growing up in Glasgow, her FGR support appears to spark a curiosity in her friends:

You know, even just when you're speaking to friends about what you're doing at the weekend, and you say, I'm going to a football match, or you know, and they'll say, "Oh, that's not that you, you wouldn't normally go to a football match" and you say, "Oh, no, but this team, you know, it's the greenest team and, you know, then greenest football team in the world." And, you know, so I can, it gives me an opportunity, really, I suppose to raise awareness of the environmental work they're doing.

George similarly remarked on using his fandom to enter conversations about "serious issues" such as environmentalism. He noted, "So yeah, so it's almost like, so it's—they're serious issues, but it's also fun to talk about them, and you've got a way in to talk about them because you're a Forest Green fan and people are interested in the fact that you're following Forest Green."

In turn, conversations with others about FGR's environmental sustainability efforts often invite conversations about lifestyles related to environmentalism. For example, Olivia shared, "I think, just by chatting to people about the reason why I support the team,

um it's opened my lifestyle out to people that I meet. So, they might ask me, 'Oh! I didn't know you are vegan.'" Grace similarly noted how FGR has provided a road into discussing broader lifestyle choices:

I mean, I live in a really rural environment. I'm surrounded by livestock farmers. And, I mean, when I first moved here with my partner it was quite You hear all these stories about how farmers can get a bit agitated with people who are obviously are against what they do. But, to be honest, it opens up a conversation because there's a couple of the farmers that know who FGR are, and so you can have that conversation with them. And it's quite a good way of . . . breaking down barriers as such? You know, it's because sport's really good at that, isn't it? Sport is supposed to be inclusive, and it's not supposed to be racist, or sexist, or whatever. So it's quite a good way of breaking down those barriers. Um, yeah definitely. And some people already know about it. "Oh, that's the Vegan team, right?," "Yeah!" "Oh, do you support them because you're vegan?" And you go, "Yeah actually it is." "Oh, really, wow, okay." So, it's kind of coming into the conversation in a nice way.

In reflecting on their fandom, some participants noted they believe money given to FGR (i.e., via tickets, concessions, or merchandise) is money better spent. Finn shared:

So, I feel that even if my team lose, the, the sixteen pounds I spend on a game, at least, um, that money will have contributed hopefully to influencing people to make changes in their own lives about the environment and, and ecology.

And this is something they feel can contribute to change. Samuel shared:

I think that every, every person in football that comes across Forest Green and learns about what Forest Green are doing gets that exposure to the idea that it can be done. I think I think there's a lot of pessimism perhaps around uh long-standing institutions and their inability to change, 'well, in this, we've done it for 150 years, so we need to carry on doing it that way.' I don't think that's the case and by supporting Forest Green both, you know, financially and . . . um, by speaking about them and engaging in that community, I think that it will make positive impacts.

Although FGR is unique in their approach to environmental issues, participants believed what FGR has done can become mainstream and impact widespread change. As Henry said, "It's like throwing a stone into a pond, it creates ripples and I think that's what a team like this can do."

Theoretical Discussion (RQ2)

Despite participants already identifying with environmentalism, they recognized the small impressions FGR had on them in their own lives, and perhaps more substantially, how their support of the club has encouraged others' environmental consciousness. As a result, participants understood how their fandom—and pro-environment actions related to this fandom—are contributing to change regarding environmental issues. These findings lead to the following theoretical contributions: (1) differences in team identity related collective action based on social movement type (i.e., competitive vs. conversionary collective action; Wright, 2009); and (2) noting the potential of unique social groups to provide individuals

experienced (rather than imagined; Reicher & Haslam, 2012) status quo alternatives, empowering collective action.

Team Identity and Collective Action

Scholars have noted the difficulty for individuals to bring about social change, emphasizing the potential power of a group in such efforts (Van Zomeren et al., 2008); the same is especially true for people seeking change on environmental issues—that is, a politicized identity removed from social categories (Mackay et al., 2021). Among FGR supporters we interviewed, engagement with the club reinforces beliefs on environmental issues and, at times, educates them on these matters. This, in turn, prompts them to make pro-environmental changes in their lives, and, critically, encourages others to do so as well. Thus, in settings where team identity is representative of a politicized identity, sport fandom—and the belongingness such an identity provides (e.g., Lock & Heere, 2017)—may be a potentially effective structure for individuals to feel a sense of collective efficacy on the given social issue.

As mentioned, the FGR supporters we interviewed discussed at length the ways they have talked to others about environmental issues via their support for FGR—effectively involving the public to impact change via social influence (e.g., Klandermans, 2014; Wright, 2009). This leads us to a critical point: the collective action that may flow from identifying with a team linked to political issues may vary based on the nature of the social movement it represents. Social movements involving one group's struggle for status versus another (e.g., women's movement) are likely to encourage a divisive boundary between groups (i.e., us vs. them; Wright, 2009), and this has been observed in research on sport fans (Delia, 2020). However, social movements involving efforts to encourage as many people as possible to adopt similar views (e.g., environmental movement) essentially do the opposite—group members are often focused on “making them into one of us” (Wright, 2009, p. 872). In our study, supporters' conversations with others about FGR and environmental issues served this purpose. As inquiry into team identity, politicized identity, and collective action grows, scholars should pay particular attention to the distinction between competitive and conversionary collective action (Wright, 2009).

Cognitive Alternatives to the Status Quo

Participants' propensity to discuss FGR and its values with others can be better understood by considering the literature on cognitive alternatives. For those who identify with environmentalism, FGR is a community that fosters ruminations on ideas and cognitive alternatives to the environmental status quo (Wright et al., 2020). For social change to occur, individuals must envision cognitive alternatives to the status quo (Reicher & Haslam, 2012). These ideas are routinely discussed as imagined people can imagine what social change might look like (cognitive alternatives). Environmentally, this includes considering living in harmony with nature rather than dominating it, and critically, increased (decreased) power among groups seeking to protect (maintain the status quo on) the environment (Wright et al., 2020).

Interestingly, among FGR supporters we interviewed, alternatives to the environmental status quo did not seem imagined—for these individuals, they were real. With FGR's tremendous approach to addressing environmental issues, supporters can experience an alternative to the environmental status quo. Because fans can experience this in real life, they believe in such a scenario extending to the rest of life. Thus, it seems only natural that these supporters share this

belief (and experience) with others (e.g., friends, family, and neighbors) as a form of collective action. It is likely participants' ability to experience a status quo alternative (on top of imagining it) subsequently empowers them (Drury & Reicher, 2005) via collective action. As such, we suggest that consideration of alternatives to the status quo in relation to social identity and collective action generally (e.g., Reicher & Haslam, 2012) or concerning environmental issues specifically (Wright et al., 2020) need not be limited to imagined alternatives. Scenarios in which people have lived status quo alternatives via group membership likely encourage visions of wholesale social change and consequently, collective action.

Managerial Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

Participants in our study indicated their support of FGR is representative of environmentalism, to the point of the team identity becoming a politicized identity; support of FGR has encouraged pro-environment actions in their own lives. In this section, we discussed the managerial implications of our findings and limitations and suggestions for future research.

Managerial Implications

Among FGR supporters we interviewed, most prioritized the club's sustainability efforts over winning. As mentioned, these supporters' synergized team and environmental identities appear to strengthen their connection with the club, while also encouraging varied considerations of success. Sport managers should be mindful of how politicized identities can become alternative sources to team identity meaning. These situations may simultaneously intensify supporters' identification with a team and lessen the impact of poor on-field performance by reminding fans of a greater purpose. Critically, given that it is unlikely a team's entire fanbase will support a related politicized identity, managers must balance “traditional” team values or meaning (team history and on-field success; e.g., Delia & James, 2018) while embracing alternative (and political) sources of meaning. In such scenarios, employing targeted strategies to connect with different cohorts of fans is likely ideal, all with an awareness that commitment to a social movement may result in disidentification among some supporters. Many teams have carefully navigated this by supporting fan groups (e.g., supporters clubs) that focus on marginalized or politicized identities; supporting these fan subgroups allows teams to show support for disadvantaged groups without a wholesale change to the organization's mission.

Our findings indicate that FGR's initiatives have done more than generate awareness, instead inspiring advocacy. Specifically, FGR supporters we interviewed have used their support of the team to influence others concerning environmentalism (see Trail & McCullough, 2018). Sport managers can evaluate the reach of their environmental campaigns by the extent to which environmental organizational values extend into the lives of their supporters (i.e., fans). In this case, supporters are advocating and advancing the message of environmentalism through sport, engaging more directly with others, which is a more effective communication for engagement and sustained behavioral change (Keller & Fay, 2012). We must also note that the implications here extend beyond sport organizations, to policymakers and/or nonprofit organizations seeking to impact individuals concerning environmental issues. Sport fandom may be an effective means for individuals to act toward change in terms of changing behaviors and encouraging others to do so. This is especially true given that global consumer research on climate change shows

individuals would be encouraged to make changes in their own lives based on seeing people they know make changes (Ipsos, 2023).

Limitations and Future Research

In designing our study, we chose to study FGR supporters who identified with the club and environmentalism. We made this decision with our RQs in mind, aiming to understand the potential intersection of sport fandom and environmentalism. However, it is likely the effects of a club's environmental sustainability efforts vary among fans who do not identify with environmentalism. Inquiry into team identity and environmentalism could include assessing these identities in varying combinations, such as identifying with a team but not environmentalism or identifying with environmentalism but only casually support a team.

In this study, we utilized FGR supporters as an intrinsic case study into exploring the intersection of team identity and environmentalism. As noted, we selected FGR specifically because of its holistic approach to addressing environmental concerns. Exploring similar topics in settings where teams address environmental issues more subtly may add to our findings in this study. Scholars might also examine team identity and environmentalism in settings where team owners or other stakeholders (e.g., sponsors) engage in practices that run counter to environmental initiatives. For example, scholars could explore identity impacts among supporters of teams or athletes associated with the oil industry. Although there are several instances of this in football (e.g., Newcastle United, Manchester City, Real Madrid), this extends to other sports as well, such as golf (e.g., LIV) and cycling (e.g., UAE Team Emirates).

Finally, we limited our recruitment of FGR supporters residing in Britain to understand the experiences of those who regularly engage with the club via match attendance. However, due to its unique approach to addressing environmental matters, FGR has supporters in other parts of the world (Papp-Vary & Farkas, 2022). Acknowledging differences between local and distant fans (Wann, 2006), scholars could examine how a club's uniqueness (in this case, unapologetically addressing environmental concerns) limits or advances its reach, and how distant fans reap the benefits of identifying with the team from afar. Relatedly, researchers might study fans who support multiple teams aligned with the same cause; in conversations with participants in our study, many mentioned awareness of other politically oriented football clubs (e.g., Germany's FC St. Pauli). Such inquiries may have meaningful implications concerning multiple team identities and the social movement or politicized identity that links them.

Conclusion

Social identity is rooted in matters of social change (Tajfel, 1978). Despite this—and decades of scholars' use of SIA to study sport fans (Lock & Heere, 2017)—sport consumer behavior inquiry has seldom examined this area (Delia, 2020). Perhaps this is because of a tendency to view sport and politics separately, even though they are inseparable (Malik, 2021). It has become somewhat routine to witness social movements related to, for example, racism, gender, human rights, and climate change infiltrate sport spaces. Thus, while on the surface, the case of FGR and its supporters' collective action may seem like an anomaly, we close by offering an alternative viewpoint: Given the rise of brand and consumer activism (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and the mounting intersection of sport and social issues, what if FGR and its supporters are a glimpse into a future where sport fans do not

leave their politics at the stadium entry gates? Might consumers decide to follow a team based on its support (or lack thereof) of particular social issues? The intersection of sport and politics is unavoidable, as are the effects of such on sport fandom. Reflecting on our research with FGR supporters in this study, the potential for a team identity to become a politicized identity, where fans frequently act for change in conjunction with and because of their support of the club adds to a limited but important line of research concerning sport fandom and social change.

Notes

1. FGR was promoted to League Two in 2022, but then relegated to League One in 2023. At the time of interviews in September 2022, FGR was competing in League Two after their recent promotion.

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