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*Sustainable Development Communication and Promotion: Evidence
from Top European Football Clubs*

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Abstract

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has brought most forms of communication to the web. Most of those who are interested can learn about the activities of their favourite football club mainly from official websites and accounts on social networks. Due to the deepening climate crisis and the growing awareness of the society, so many people demand very detailed information about corporate environmental impact. Nowadays, a professional football club, wishing to maintain high popularity, should be focusing not only on sports results, but also on attitudes towards the environment and society it presents and promotes. The great example in that case can be top football clubs in the European league because, many other football

clubs copy solutions from the best. This paper examines the 5 of top European football clubs' activities area for the better natural environment and the way how these activities are communicated to the football fans. The main research was conducted using publicly available electronic information channels such as football clubs' websites, reports or social media (like Facebook) accounts. The aim of the article is to indicate to what extent the functioning and reporting of leading football clubs is also subject to the principles of sustainable development in the field of the natural environment. The results can indicate the significance of the current contribution of the top European football clubs to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals, as well as setting the directions of sustainable development for other football clubs in the future.

Introduction

In the society, sport plays many varied roles. Present from almost the beginning of the existence of civilization, it can overcome intercultural barriers, supporting (especially among young people) mutual respect and understanding for different, more or less distinct cultures. It is also considered an important aspect supporting the socialization of young people (Hatzigeorgiadis et al., 2013, pp. 191–192). The impact of sport can also be carried over into the financial sphere. Pursuant to the growing trend to implement psychological factors affecting investors for the purposes of financial analyzes, some researchers have started work on the relationship between sports results and the behavior of indices on stock exchanges. As a result of their research, statistically significant relationships were found between behavior of European stock exchange indices and the sports results achieved by national teams in football of individual countries (Klein et al., 2009, pp. 191–192).

Due to the increasing problems associated with overweight and other diseases among an increasing percentage of the population, especially in North America and Europe, sport is the basis for promoting a healthy lifestyle and increasing people's activity. According to many studies, improving activity can positively affect not only physical but also mental aspects of both – young people and adults (Malm et al., 2019). The results of research conducted in these areas are also confirmed by the official position of the World Health Organization (WHO, n.d.).

In the scientific literature, the issue of the relationship between social responsibility and sport, despite the dynamic increase in popularity in recent years, has been discussed relatively rarely (Mallen, Adams, Stevens, & Thompson, 2010; Mallen, Stevens, Adams, & McRoberts, 2010; Tranter & Lowes, 2009; Faccia et al., 2020). As Dingle (2016) notes, recent years have seen a kind of clear increase in the number of journals and research undertaken in this area, but their characteristics still seem to reflect the level of early years of research on social responsibility in non-sport areas. Nowadays, more and more factors of sustainability in football clubs and the benefits from implementation sustainable management are well known (Schregela et al., 2021). On the other hand, there is still not so many information in the scope of level of informing sport clubs about sustainable development, especially in the field of natural environment. It is significantly important now, when more and more people are caring about the effects of negative climate change. This will allow to

present a research question in the article to what extent the knowledge about the benefits of sustainability for top European football clubs translates into the level of informing fans. The aim of the article is to indicate to what extent the functioning and reporting of leading football clubs is also subject to the principles of sustainable development in the field of the natural environment.

The study was conducted on the basis of content analyzing the websites and official Facebook profiles of the top 5 European football clubs and restricted only to electronic communication channels. The structure of the article includes 5 main chapters: Introduction, Literature review (including: Sustainable development of the city – in connection with the football club), Empirical results, Discussion, and Conclusions.

Literature review

The importance of sport, however, seems to extend well beyond its cultural and health aspects. Sport can also provide the basis for achieving higher global goals. Nelson Mandela, the first president of the Republic of South Africa, fought racial inequality in his country enabling greater equality for citizens (Mandela, 2011). In one of his speeches, he stated that

Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire, it has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope, where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination. (*Nelson Mandela Foundation, n.d.*)

Obviously, the impact of sport, on the basis of the individual discipline, depends heavily on its popularity in Europe and throughout the world. The more popular a given discipline is, the wider group of people it gathers around itself. The popularity of individual disciplines is somewhat differentiated depending on individual countries or regions of the world. For example, in Poland, for many years, the most popular group of sports has been team sports (in 2020 there are more than 50% of all exercising persons), and football is the most frequently chosen discipline among them (37.5% of exercising persons). Further places belong to sport shooting (6.5% of people who exercise) and volleyball, which was popular among, approximately, 5.9% of people who work out. This relatively small percentage of people training volleyball was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Normally volleyball is second the most popular sport in Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2020). In the United States, the most popular sport is American football, which is a separate discipline with rules other than traditional football. The next places are occupied by baseball and basketball. Football (which is called “soccer” in the US) is on the not so far fifth place (World Atlas, 2021).

All in all, from the global and European point of view the most popular sport is football. In the global perspective this discipline has about 4 billion fans in the

whole world (Famous European Sports, n.d.; World Atlas, 2021). The popularity of football has remained unchanged for years, as evidenced by both the available statistics of viewership and participation in sports events of this kind, as well as the number of active players and the popularity of research on the multidimensional issues of football and the phenomenon of its popularity (Di Corrado et al., 2011; Dvorak et al., 2004; Nosal, 2015).

Nowadays, the potential associated with the popularity of football is being used more and more intensively in the fight against social inequalities, intolerance or negative impact on the natural environment. These goals are set out in the form of targets for 2030 in the form of the Sustainable Development Agenda (The Global Goals, 2021).

Since the Paris Agreement, the issue of the deepening climate crisis has been discussed more and more frequently in public debate. Growing anxiety (related to the potential negative consequences of the proceedings) so far prompted the European Union to accelerate legislative work, which ultimately led to the adoption of the European Green Deal. This strategy aims to drastically and as quickly as possible change the negative environmental impact of a wide range of industries in the EU countries. These changes mainly concern greenhouse gas emissions, but also waste management, limiting the length of supply chains and food production within the Union (European Green Deal, n.d.).

The assumptions contained in the European Green Deal also apply to broadly understood sport, including football sport clubs. In order to meet the growing expectations, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) is increasingly emphasizing the importance of football in creating the sustainable development of sport, sports competitions, and the football clubs themselves. Moreover, due to the widespread popularity of football, UEFA expects that the football leagues in each country, its stadiums, and the organized competitions of various ranks will drastically reduce their negative impact on the environment (Keating, 2021).

The first test for new trends in the organization of events of significant importance, in accordance with the principles of the European Green Deal is UEFA EURO 2020 Championship (Men's European Football Championship), which due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, was postponed to 2021. This challenge is also special due to the unique format of the championship. For the first time in history, the traditional form of playing all matches in one host country was abandoned in favor of a dispersed model of competition at stadiums in different European countries, and even in Asia (e.g. Baku) (AS.com, 2021).

In addition to significant changes in the manner of organization, notable differences from the previous championships also apply to the rules of conducting the games and new technologies available for refereeing. From the point of achieving the goals of sustainable sport functioning, these changes were of little importance (UEFA.com, 2021a).

The potential that is found in sport, which is football, and in particular competitions that are so popular in the context of ecological and climate problems as

well as broadly understood sustainability, can be demonstrated by, for example, the Greenpeace action carried out at the stadium in Munich. During the group phase match, shortly before the first whistle, a paraglider appeared above the stadium and flew inside the stadium. However, an attempt to manifest and draw attention to significant problems turned out to be not very successful. The demonstrator, while flying inside the stadium, caught on the ropes on which the TV camera was moving, what disturbed the paraglider. Eventually, after forming an arc over the stands, that person landed on the pitch, and at the same time injured two bystanders with a propeller. As it turned out after the paraglider was arrested, the aim of his daring flight was to demonstrate his opposition to the production and sale of cars powered by internal combustion engines by one of the sponsors of the event – the Volkswagen concern. The daring action, unfortunately, had a rather negative impact on the organization itself and rather distracted from the main message about excessive emissions, which was to be its main goal (Deutsche Welle, 2021; The Guardian, 2021).

The strength of the influence of popular footballers on individual social groups has been the subject of many scientific studies, primarily in the field of sociology and psychology. For example, in their own research, Alan J. Bush from the University of Memphis, together with Craig A. Martin and Victoria D. Bush, undertook research on the influence of sports celebrities on the behaviors of the so-called Generation Y (or Millennials) – generation of people born in the 1980s and 1990s (Goldgehn, 2004, p. 25). As a result of the research, it was established that the athlete role model influence is positively related to teenagers' favorable word-of-mouth communications. Moreover, the same research shows that an athlete's role model influence is positively related to teenagers' brand loyalty. Additionally, the researched dependencies apply to women to a slightly greater extent than men when it comes to recommending a given brand or product to others (Bush et al., 2004, p. 113). Other studies conducted much later in 2016, also focusing on Sports Celebrity Credibility on Purchase Intention, likewise confirmed the significant influence of athletes on consumers' purchasing decisions – the greater, the more credible a sportsperson is in her/his behavior (Dusenberget al., 2016, pp. 11–12).

One of the latest examples of situations confirming the above-mentioned scientific studies is one of the Portuguese team's press conferences during the UEFA EURO 2020 games with the participation of Cristiano Ronaldo. During the conference, the competitor looked at the bottles with drinks from sponsors, which are always on the table in front of speakers, and then put the bottle of Coca Cola and Coca Cola Zero away from him and said to journalists "drink water" pointing to the bottle of water next to him. This way of emphasizing own choice had a very negative impact on the Coca Cola Company shares, which almost immediately (after Ronaldo's gesture) fell by 1.6% of the value of a single share. Overall, the company's market value then fell from USD 242 billion to USD 238 billion (Polsat News, 2021).

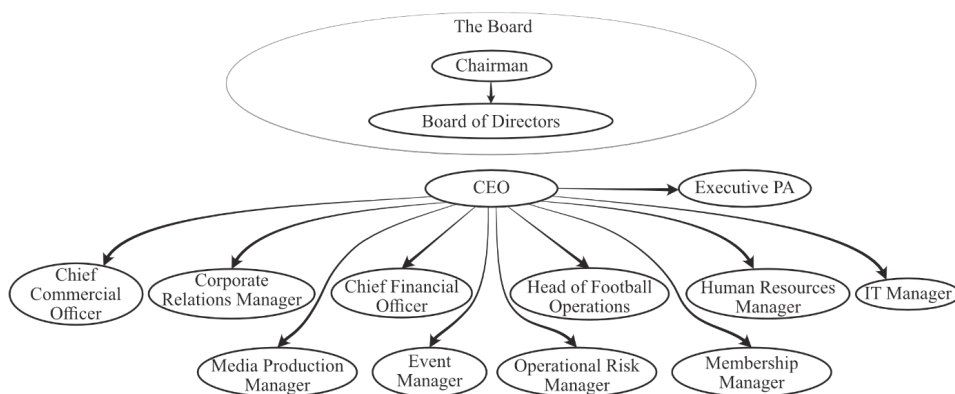


Figure 1. General organizational structure of a football club

Source: Authors' own study based on (Bazzi, 2019).

The power of communication that popular and often the best footballers have at their disposal is significant, but the implementation of the principles of sustainability is associated not only with the promotion of proper conduct. Football clubs are primarily obliged to undertake activities (within their organization) aimed at implementing the assumptions of the European Green Deal. Nowadays, football clubs are very complex organizations, the overall structure of which is presented in Figure 1.

Contribution to the sustainability of football clubs for the implementation of the European Green Deal assumptions may be multidimensional. Due to the diverse nature of activities undertaken as part of the operation of individual clubs, there are many areas in which such sport organizations can contribute to achieving the goals of sustainability.

The largest and the best football clubs in Europe, which regularly take part in competitions at the highest level, are also large institutions strongly connected with the cities in which the club is located. Such organizations are often one of the largest economic entities in their agglomeration – so they can exert a significant influence on the development of it. A large, recognizable football club that achieves sports success can make a significant contribution to the employment of local people. Additionally, the club's high turnover can provide tax benefits for the local administration (Roşca, 2010, p. 64).

It must be stated that currently, due to the deteriorating climate crisis, some European metropolitan areas are implementing a number of solutions in pilot programs to transform into intelligent cities of tomorrow. Such metropolises include, among others, Barcelona and Manchester (Lai et al., 2020). These types of projects are referred to as Smart City, but formally in the literature there is no universal definition of this concept. Many authors point to the key role of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) (Chamran et al., 2019; Deakin, 2013). From this perspective, Smart City can be defined as an urban environment that makes extensive use of ICT and

other related technologies in order to increase the efficiency of regular city operations and the quality of services provided to its residents (Silva et al., 2018).

Over the years, many international organizations have formulated their own definitions of Smart City. In Europe, such an initiative was taken by the European Commission, which defined the Smart City as “a place where traditional networks and services are made more efficient with the use of digital and telecommunication technologies for the benefit of its inhabitants and business” (European Commission Smart Cities, n.d.). Moreover, European Commission said that

a smart city goes beyond the use of ICT for better resource use and less emissions. It means smarter urban transport networks, upgraded water supply and waste disposal facilities and more efficient ways to light and heat buildings. It also means a more interactive and responsive city administration, safer public spaces and meeting the needs of an ageing population, (European Commission Smart Cities, n.d.)

thus, emphasizing the importance of using ICT to reduce the negative impact of cities on the natural environment.

The changes and technologies necessary to implement the Smart City assumptions are usually costly and their effective implementation often requires many stable sources of financing. Programs of this type implemented in the city, in order to provide real benefits, usually require support from both the public sphere as well as private organizations or investors (Galati, 2018, p. 37).

Real support in projects related to Smart City can be provided by sports organizations such as football clubs. The presence of a recognized football club usually significantly influences the promotion of the region, and thus tourist traffic increases, as well as the local business develops. Joint meetings of local communities at sports events and the possibility of identifying with the team have a positive effect on the socialization of the inhabitants of a given city or region. Many of the activities undertaken by a sports club can also be important from an environmental point of view. The transport infrastructure selected and developed by the club's authorities can have a significant impact on the city's emission of pollutants (caused by fans), and the appropriate sound protection (or the absence thereof) have an impact on noise pollution and on the comfort of life of people living in the proximity of the stadium. Moreover, due to numerous trainings and matches played in the evening or at night, a sports club can significantly influence the city's electricity demand (Roşca, 2010, pp. 63–67).

Research methods

The content analysis carried out includes the classification of text information – using a detailed protocol and data coding (Boyatzis, 1998; Bryman & Bell, 2015) related to sustainability activities undertaken by the top 5 European football clubs

(UEFA.com, 2021b). The objects for the study were selected based on the UEFA European Cup ranking (1955–2021) and the main research was conducted in July 2021. In the first instance, three main online communication channels (used to transmit CSR information) were distinguished: CSR report, website tab and activity on official profiles in the biggest social media platform (Global Social media statistics, 2022) – Facebook profiles (shown in Table 1). Because the purpose of this article is to evaluate the level of informing sports clubs about their ecological sustainability efforts, the main work of this article is to classify football clubs as providing their stakeholders with a low (or no), medium or high level of sustainability information (shown in Table 2). The key areas of the functioning of football clubs, from the point of view of CSR used in coding, have been identified based on the sustainability ranking of football clubs from the British Premier League in the 2019/2020 season. On this basis, the following areas were specified: clean energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, single-use plastic reduction or removal, waste management, water efficiency, sustainable foods, communications & engagement. The collected information from the clubs was then coded using a checklist in an MS Excel spreadsheet, in accordance with a three-point measurement scale. The assessment of each area was based on the following three levels of information:

- low – football club declares to undertake the initiative in a given area of activity,
- medium – football club declares taking initiative in a given area of activity and provides examples of such activities,
- high – football club declares taking initiative in a given area of activity and provides examples of such activities, together with a description of their results and figures.

Results

Modern economy places new social and business demands, and one of them is the need for transparency and communication of the concept of sustainable development. There are many ways to inform about it: CSR report, websites or constantly gaining popularity – profiles on social networks.

All analyzed clubs communicate with fans via social media like Facebook. Almost all of them also use Facebook profiles to provide information about actions for the benefit of the public. The exception here is Bayern München, which mainly provides information only about the players' actions. In this case, the social activity is more provided by the players themselves, e.g. Manuel Neuer Foundation.

Almost all clubs also have a separate tab on their websites. This tab is devoted only to information about CSR. The exception here is Bayern, which did not separate (on the website) information related to socially responsible activities. A greater diversification can be noticed in the case of the availability of CSR reports prepared by the examined football clubs. Manchester United and FC Bayern München have

decided not to publish comprehensive CSR reports for fans. In their case, we can only rely on single pieces of information that are mostly provided in the news.

Table 1. Channels providing information about sustainability by football clubs

No.	Football club	Official CSR report	Website tab	Facebook posts
1	Real Madrid CF	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	FC Bayern München	No	No	No (partially by Manuel Neuer Foundation)
3	FC Barcelona	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Manchester United FC	No	Yes	Yes
5	Juventus FC (Torino)	Yes	Yes (easier way than in Manchester)	Yes

Source: Authors' own study based on: (Real Madrid CSR Report 2020–2021, 2021; Real Madrid Official Website, n.d.; Real Madrid Facebook profile, n.d.; FC Bayern München Official Website, n.d.; FC Bayern München Facebook profile, n.d.; FC Barcelona CSR Report, n.d.; FC Barcelona Official Website, n.d.; FC Barcelona Facebook profile, n.d.; Manchester United FC CSR, n.d.; Manchester United FC Official Website, n.d.; Manchester United FC Facebook profile, n.d.; Juventus CSR Report, 2021; Juventus Official Website, n.d.; Juventus Facebook profile, n.d.).

Furthermore, below is the assessment of the information provided related to the sustainability of the football club in the areas of: clean energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, single-use plastic reduction or removal, waste management, water efficiency, sustainable foods and communications & engagement.

Table 2. The level of informing sports clubs about the specified subjects concerning sustainable development

Football club	Information level			
	Lack	Low	Medium	High
	Clean energy			
Real Madrid CF				x
FC Bayern München				x
FC Barcelona				x
Manchester United FC		x		
Juventus FC (Torino)				x
	Energy efficiency			
Real Madrid CF			x	
FC Bayern München			x	
FC Barcelona			x	
Manchester United FC		x		
Juventus FC (Torino)				x
	Sustainable transport			
Real Madrid CF			x	
FC Bayern München		x		
FC Barcelona				x
Manchester United FC	x			
Juventus FC (Torino)				x

Football club	Information level			
	Lack	Low	Medium	High
	Single-use plastic reduction or removal			
Real Madrid CF				x
FC Bayern München			x	
FC Barcelona	x			
Manchester United FC	x			
Juventus FC (Torino)	x			
	Waste management			
Real Madrid CF				x
FC Bayern München		x		
FC Barcelona			x	
Manchester United FC		x		
Juventus FC (Torino)				x
	Water efficiency			
Real Madrid CF			x	
FC Bayern München	x			
FC Barcelona				x
Manchester United FC			x	
Juventus FC (Torino)	x			
	Sustainable foods			
Real Madrid CF			x	
FC Bayern München	x			
FC Barcelona	x			
Manchester United FC	x			
Juventus FC (Torino)	x			
	Communications & engagement			
Real Madrid CF				x
FC Bayern München				x
FC Barcelona				x
Manchester United FC				x
Juventus FC (Torino)				x

Source: Authors' own study based on: (Real Madrid CSR Report 2020–2021, 2021; Real Madrid Official Website, n.d.; Real Madrid Facebook profile, n.d.; FC Bayern München Official Website, n.d.; FC Bayern München Facebook profile, n.d.; FC Barcelona CSR Report, n.d.; FC Barcelona Official Website, n.d.; FC Barcelona Facebook profile, n.d.; Manchester United FC CSR, n.d.; Manchester United FC Official Website, n.d.; Manchester United FC Facebook profile, n.d.; Juventus CSR Report, 2021; Juventus Official Website, n.d.; Juventus Facebook profile, n.d.).

At the beginning of the analyzes, it is worth mentioning that while the substantive scope of disclosed information is very similar, its comprehensiveness and detailedness vary considerably.

It should be noted that only one of the examined football clubs informs its stakeholders about each of the specified areas – it is Real Madrid. On the other hand, the issue that all analyzed clubs, to a large extent, inform about is communications and engagement. Among others, this field includes: charitable work for the benefit of local communities; supporting culture, sport, entrepreneurship, and broadly understood education and tolerance (campaigns against violence). The most flagship activity of clubs in this area, which they are happy to inform about, is the establishment of

football schools for children and teenagers (incl. FCBEscola, Real Madrid Soccer Camps, FC Bayern Kids Club).

Quality and quantity of information disclosed by the listed sports clubs (within the scope of sustainability) is the highest when it comes to clean energy – right after communications and engagement. This category most often includes messages from sports clubs about the installation of photovoltaic panels on the roofs of sports facilities.

In relation to energy efficiency, most of the analyzed clubs maintain an average level of informing. In these cases, they are limited only to indicating the areas in which they have taken actions – but without specific, measurable data. Manchester United, which mentions energy efficiency activities very laconically, breaks out of this trend. Juventus, on the other hand, stands out from the rest of the clubs by indicating: the certificates it has; the actions taken; and some limited figures relating to the results. For all analyzed football clubs, the main activities increasing energy efficiency concerned upgrading the lighting of the facilities and their surroundings to modern LED lighting.

As in the case of the above-mentioned energy efficiency, each of the five analyzed football clubs informs stakeholders about the activities undertaken in the field of waste management. The leaders in communicating this are Real Madrid and Barcelona. Thanks to cooperation agreements with companies dealing with selective and coordinated waste collection, the clubs are able to meet all the requirements for the collection, transport, and processing of both harmless and hazardous waste. As for the information itself, these clubs provide measurable data on waste collected in the 2019/2020 season. For example, the amount of hazardous waste collected (Juventus – 468 kg, Real Madrid – 460 kg) or the share of recyclable waste in the whole waste stream collected (Juventus – 99.25%, Real Madrid – 89.34%). Both the presented activities related to waste management and informing about them can be an example for the other football clubs discussed, which unfortunately approach this subject in a more perfunctory way.

Moving onto the issue of sustainable transport, one can notice a strongly different approach to this issue among the various football clubs. Juventus and Barcelona approached this problem most seriously. In the case of the first of these clubs, emphasis was placed on the reduction of CO₂ emissions from own means of transport. The published reports present the CO₂ emission caused by club transport during each season. This number is systematically decreasing. Barcelona, on the other hand, focused on activities aimed at increasing the number of fans reaching the stadium by using low-emission means of transport, such as bicycles or public transport. For the latter, additional 80 parking spots have recently been created.

Information on sustainable transport looks slightly better (than water efficiency) in the case of the football clubs studied. In the case of water use, only Barcelona indicates, in an extensive way, steps to reduce water consumption by their stadium – Camp Nou. The descriptions are accompanied by (numerical) figures, unfortunately

limited only to the development of greenery around the stadium – which is minimizing the additional water demand in the Mediterranean climate, i.e. the number of trees will increase from the current 599 trees to the total number of 759 trees (representing more than 25% increase). Bayern München and Juventus ignore the subject of water efficiency (in information submitted by them). Other clubs – Manchester United and Real Madrid only mention sustainable water consumption by providing examples of areas for reducing consumption (rainwater harvesting systems, magnetic water treatment for rainwater harvesting) without specific figures.

The first field of information regarding sustainability that should definitely be improved is sustainable food. This does not mean, however, that sports clubs are not taking action on the above issue. However, it should be emphasized that as many as four out of five clubs do not mention it in official CSR reports, on the website, or in posts on Facebook. It is worth noting that Real Madrid is the leader in this field. The club promises that it works only with local and ecologically responsible food suppliers. Additionally, due to such a huge scale of food waste, Real Madrid sends surplus food to the eatery after each match.

A similar problem is raised by the issue of informing about the reduction of disposable plastic packaging. Barcelona, Manchester United and Juventus football clubs do not report on this issue. On the other hand, it is worth appreciating that Real Madrid scrupulously informs the audience about the actions taken thereon. Since 2007, the club has a contract with Ecoembes Spain for the selective collection and recovery of lightweight containers and cardboard at the Santiago Bernabéu stadium. Under this agreement, approximately 321,950 kg of waste were collected in the 2019/2020 season, and approximately 163 tons of lightweight containers and 124 tons of paper and cardboard were recovered in this way. During the 13 years of the contract with Ecoembes, more than 5,176 tons of lightweight containers and 1,635 tons of paper and cardboard have been recycled. It should be emphasized that clubs often publish information about the awards received due to the actions taken regarding sustainable development, without describing their specific effects. This is the case of Bayern München, which in 2019, received the Reusable Award from Environmental Action Germany, a non-profit association dedicated to environmental and consumer protection, for introducing reusable plastic cups at home matches at the Allianz Arena. There is news about ensuring that specific actions are taken and about the reward for this, but there is no result in the form of figures on how much (approximately) single-use waste has not been produced thanks to this.

Discussions

The values promoted by sport seem to be as important now as the sports results and financial results achieved by sports clubs. Some researchers point to the significant potential of creating added value by football clubs not only through the

generated financial results, the sports level represented by the team and individual players, but also through orientation towards sustainable development (Faccia et al., 2020). Moreover, sustainable development as an element of fan welfare maximization is indicated as one of the most important factors affecting the image and financial results of a football club (Cruz et al., 2021). Some studies clearly show a significant impact of activities carried out by sports clubs on specific attitudes of the community. Among other things, a significant development among the environment-friendly mobility society has been demonstrated, thanks to the activities undertaken by sports clubs in Switzerland (Moser et al., 2019).

Attempts are currently underway to standardize the way in which economic entities (including football clubs) provide non-financial information on the areas of sustainable development, for example, as part of the European Green Deal (Wicha, 2021). However, it seems crucial to define the significant impact that football clubs perceive in the area of activities for sustainable development and local communities on the development of the club and the fan community. A good determinant may be not only the number and types of activities undertaken in the field of sustainable development, but above all their form of communicating to fans and supporters of a given football club. Football clubs that do not recognize the importance of activities not directly related to sporting performance do not place much emphasis on promoting activities for sustainable development, even if such activities are carried out.

The conducted research, in the previous section, provided answers on the scope of communicating sustainable actions of the top European football clubs according to the UEFA ranking. They show that the top European football clubs are committed in this regard and this speaks well of their socially responsible attitude. However, they clearly still a little room for improvement, which was described above.

It is worth emphasizing that apart from the research conducted for this article, there is still room for research in the field of sustainable development activities and their communication at the level of clubs – for example, from lower leagues, both in Poland and other European countries. These types of organizations, although they have much smaller budgets and do not attract much attention of international opinion, often constitute a very important part of the life of local communities. Therefore, they can significantly influence the development of positive ecological and social attitudes or their reduction.

Conclusions

Sustainable development is definitely an important element of functioning among the best European football clubs. In recent years, they have systematically and consistently implemented elements of social responsibility in their activities. Nevertheless, implementation of the new rules took place with a different level of intensification of this process in individual areas. The analyzed sports clubs were, definitely, mostly

focused on communications & engagement, concentrating their activities primarily on supporting youth and local community growth. Environmental aspects came off poorly in some clubs. It is worth noting, however, that sustainability in the context of environment seems to function in social consciousness of the organization for a slightly shorter period than, for example, support of local communities. On the other hand, involvement in various types of actions for the benefit of young people is, in a certain way, natural behavior of a football club looking for its future team among the youngest players.

Out of the areas related to environment, an area of clean energy has the highest amount of information. Energy efficiency itself came off a bit poorly, what may indicate the positive effects of promoting renewable energy as a real alternative to conventional high-emission sources. The usage of this type of power supply on as a large scale as the operation of a large stadium, can really increase the interest in this type of solutions for private needs among fans and other visitors of such a facility.

The areas that football clubs should focus on when making future decisions and initiatives, as well as when informing about them, are primarily issues of responsible food (including how to pack and serve food) and more efficient use of water resources.

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