**The Role of Organizational Values for Sustainable Development: The Case of the Forest Green Rovers and the Promotion of Plant-based Diets**

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**Abstract**

The study aims to explore the role of a professional sport team’s organizational values to promote the consumption of plant-based diets among fans. The case study focuses on the Forest Green Rovers, a football club with a strong mission to sustainable development. First, a document analysis (44 documents, 56,057 words in total) was conducted to explore the development of sustainable organizational values and how the sport organization markets their values towards fans. The findings reveal that the Forest Green Rovers were able to overcome concerns regarding their sustainability approach and were successful in implementing sustainability in the value system of both the organization and the stakeholders, thereby stimulating behavioural change. Second, a survey of Forest Green Rovers fans (*n* = 107) reveals that the adoption of a plant-based diet by fans is positively associated with team value internalization, which relates positively with fans’ intention to eat plant-based foods in the future. Thus, internalization of organizational values may play a crucial role for promoting sustainable actions among individual customers.

**Keywords**

Sustainable food, Veganism, Vegetarianism, Value Internalization, Sport Ecology

**Executive Summary**

The present study aims to explore the role of a professional sport team’s organizational values to promote the consumption of plant-based diets among fans. The study adopts a single case study, applying a mixed-methods design, using qualitative and quantitative data, to investigate the role of Forest Green Rovers’ organizational values to promote plant-based diet consumption among fans. Forest Green Rovers were selected as a case due to the implementation of vegan food initiatives as part of their ongoing pro-environmental activities.

A qualitative document analysis was conducted to explore Forest Green Rovers’ values work processes towards fans (Study 1). The present study relies on the theory of values work to explore how a professional sport team’s sustainability-directed organizational values may promote the consumption of plant-based diets among fans, that is, an important area of sustainable action in the sport event context. The analysis revealed five themes: (1) dealing with pockets of concern; (2) knotting local concerns into action networks; (3) performing values practices; (4) circulating values discourse; and (5) overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system. Most important to the present study, value internalization, that is, the extent to which values and behaviours of organizations are accepted and adopted in one’s own value system, seems to be crucial to stimulate behavioural changes in daily life, such as the adoption of a plant-based diet. To assess the role of team value internalization further, we conducted a quantitative study.

In Study 2, a survey with Forest Green Rovers fans was conducted. The study aims to assess whether fans adopted a plant-based diet when they became a fan of the team and whether such potential behavioural change is positively associated with team value internalization and, hence, fans’ intention to eat plant-based foods in the future. The relationship between adoption of a plant-based diet and team value internalization is positive and team value internalization relates positively with intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future. The indirect effect via team value internalization is significant.

To conclude, we can state that Forest Green Rovers’ systematic approach to adopt plant-based foods helped overcome value constraints within the organization and build a holistic value system that allows to implement target group-specific marketing activities. Establishing sustainable values and organizational culture likely made fans internalize team values in their own value system. Food trials are only one example to stimulate behavioural change in fans.

**1. Introduction**

Forest Green Rovers, an English football club, was the first professional sport club to receive the Vegan Trademark (The Vegan Society 2017). FIFA (2022) described the Forest Green Rovers as “the world’s greenest football club” and the club has received the UN Global Climate Action Award for its holistic sustainability practices. Samuel et al. (2022) note that the team’s owner was successful in “introducing the novel and authentic ‘sustainability’ value system into FGR (Forest Green Rovers; *added by the authors*) and the world of professional football” (p. 576). Thus, sustainability values may play a crucial role to bring corporate missions to life.

Organizational values are defined as “socially shared cognitive representations of institutional goals and demands” (Rokeach 1979, p. 50), conceptually linked to organizational culture, and can influence organizational performance (Agle and Caldwell 1999; see Kerwin et al. 2014a, 2014b, for the sport context). Thus, organizational culture and values may help marketers to promote long-term goals of organizations, increase brand awareness, and better relationships with stakeholders (Moorman and Day 2016). The present case study aims to explore the role of Forest Green Rovers’ organizational values to promote the consumption of plant-based diets by Rovers’ fans and their decisions to become vegan. Food consumption at sport venues can be an inhibitor to promoting sustainability and climate change, because most food is meat-based and rather unstainable (Parry et al. 2017; Williams and Williams 2013), and because fans’ ecological footprint is up to eight times higher while attending a sport event compared to daily life, with a large proportion of waste as a result of food consumption (Collins and Flynn 2008). Yet, to our knowledge, there are no empirical studies related to organizational sustainability values and their relationship to promoting fans’ adoption of a plant-based diet.

We conducted an initial case study using a nested mixed-methods design (Guetterman and Fetters 2018). First, we performed a document analysis to explore Forest Green Rovers’ promotion of plant-based diets and the public discourse around this. Forest Green Rovers were selected as a case due to the comprehensive implementation of sustainability initiatives since 2010 when Dale Vince became the chairman of the club and started to include the topic of sustainability at the heart of the sport organization (Forest Green Rovers 2022a). Forest Green Rovers markets its sustainability initiatives via its website and directly at game days. They built up a community program to engage adults as well as children and adolescents and, due to their comprehensive sustainability approach, attracted several sponsors, particularly since Dale Vince was appointed as UN Climate Champion (Forest Green Rovers 2023, 2022c).

Second, we surveyed Forest Green Rovers fans to assess whether they adopted a plant-based diet because of the sport organizations’ promotion of sustainable food and whether such potential behavioural change is positively associated with team value internalization and, hence, fans’ intention to adopt a plant-based diet in the future. The knowledge gained of how an organization’s sustainability values may influence the sustainable practices of sport fans advances the field of how to market sustainable food in a sports context in the following ways: (1) extending the list and description of processes of how values work towards customers’ sustainable actions (extending Gehman et al s [2013] values work theory); (2) providing process evidence for the downstream relations of how organizational values inspire changes in dietary preferences toward plant-based foods, thus outlining the relevance of organizational value internalization for the formation of sustainable behavioural intentions; and (3) showcasing how Forest Green Rovers were successful in applying the values work processes to become a sustainable organization, potentially helping other organizations to follow and successfully market their approach to stakeholders.

We briefly review the literature on sustainable food provision in sport venues before we consider the role of organizational values for the promotion of sustainable consumer-related actions. In the empirical part of our work, we rely on both documents on Forest Green Rovers and survey data with Forest Green Rovers fans to explore how values relate to fans’ own behaviours. We conclude by discussing the findings and the limitations of the present research, and by giving an outlook on future research.

**2. Literature review**

* 1. **Sustainable food provision in sport venues**

In sport venues, fans’ food choices are constrained, because one can only consume what is available at licensed venue concessions. This is because, for security reasons, fans are not allowed to bring food and drinks with them (Parry and Richards 2022). The concession-stand providers typically have exclusive rights to sell specific items, which may be associated with a team or venue sponsorship (Cornwell and Koenigstorfer 2017; Merkle and Golding 2020). Many concession items are meat-based (e. g., hot dogs, burgers, and pies) (Parry et al. 2017; Williams and Williams 2013). These items are often in contrast with sustainable food choices, which include low consumption of meat (especially beef) and dairy products, high consumption of fruits, legumes, and vegetables, and reliance on locally grown products (and avoidance of transportation by air), among others (Reisch et al. 2013; Sedlacko et al. 2013). Although concession providers and food producers often have commitments to sustainability as part of their corporate mission, most offerings provided on-site are unsustainable, because meat-based options predominate (Cornwell and Koenigstorfer 2017; Ireland and Watkins 2010; Koenigstorfer 2018; Parry et al. 2017; Parry and Richards 2022). One reason for the provision of unsustainable meat-based options may be consumer preferences, which are often driven by meat enjoyment. In several cultures, coming together and having a barbecue before or during sport games became a tradition for fans (Arnold 2023). Additionally, the familiarity with meat options and the tradition of eating meat, as well as the perceived difficulty with the preparation of plant-based food options or the higher price of such options are further barriers to the adoption of plant-based food (Pohjolainen et al. 2015; Reisch et al. 2013). They may also drive the provision of meat offerings at sport venues. In this direction, Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) note that actual behaviour is often different from stated preferences for environmentally sustainable foods. This might also be the case for fans who make taste-driven food decisions in sport venues.

Yet, some teams and venues are committed to providing sustainable food to fans. Henly and Krenza (2015) present cases in which sport venue managers adopted sustainable food systems, as found in menu planning (e.g., vegetarian and vegan options, local and seasonal ingredients), procurement (e.g., organic food, antibiotic-free food), preparation efficiency (e.g., reduce energy and water needs), service ware and packaging (e.g., reusable and recyclable service ware, packaging-free options), and waste diversion (e.g., donate unsold prepared food). They consider green game-day food as food that (1) sustains healthy water systems; (2) maintains soil nutrients; (3) optimizes agricultural land use; (4) reduces greenhouse gas emissions; (5) reduces dependence on chemical inputs; (6) safeguards the welfare of food producers and workers; and (7) minimizes the transmission of diseases at farms. These characteristics are mostly in agreement with what has been described as sustainable food options above. While Henly and Krenza (2015) outline that certain meat options meet these characteristics, it was shown that non-meat and plant-based food options are considerably more sustainable (Springmann et al. 2018). In what follows, we focus on plant-based diets, which are described as diets that avoid or reduce meat (World Health Organization 2021).

* 1. **Adoption of plant-based diets and team fandom**

One important aspect of sustainable food consumption is the promotion of plant-based diets. The World Health Organization (2021) defines plant-based diets as diets that “constitute a diverse range of dietary patterns that emphasize foods derived from plant sources coupled with lower consumption or exclusion of animal products” (p. 1). This includes fruits, vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds. Compared to meat-based diets, plant-based diets lower the impact on the environment (Meyer and Reguant-Closa 2017) and help fight climate change via reduced greenhouse gas emissions (Segovia-Siapco and Sabaté 2019). According to Springmann et al. (2018), the dietary change toward a plant-based diet could reduce relevant emissions by 56%. A plant-based diet saves resources in terms of energy, land, phosphate rock, and water (Carlsson-Kanyama and González 2009; Gerbens-Leenes and Nonhebel 2002). [1] The consumption of plant-based food can also increase personal health and reduce the risk of developing chronic diseases such as diabetes (Segovia-Siapco and Sabaté 2019; World Health Organization 2021). Yet, plant-based diets can be in conflict with enjoyment of meat, dietary habits, and health conceptions (Pohjolainen et al. 2015), which are common for sport venue visitors. Fandom, particularly football fandom in Europe, is associated with the consumption of alcohol and meat-based food (Cornwell and Koenigstorfer 2017; Ireland and Watkins 2010; Koenigstorfer 2018; Parry et al. 2017; Parry and Richards 2022). Forest Green Rovers, to our knowledge, is the only professional team that banned meat-based options from concession menus, causing some opposition among fans, particularly opposing fans (Parry et al. 2019). The meat ban can be seen as a first-time social tipping point for behavioural change toward a plant-based diet (Aschemann-Witzel and Schulze 2023). Thus, Forest Green Rovers provide an interesting case for the present research. In what follows, we describe the role of organizational values for corporations and sport organizations, respectively, in general before we consider the case of Forest Green Rovers.

**3. The role of organizational values for sustainable consumer actions**

Organizational values are an important part of strategic planning (George et al. 2019). By defining organizational values, managers point out what is important to the organization when bringing their (sustainability) mission to life (Galpin et al. 2015). Integrating environmental and green values in marketing programs can help organizations embrace environmentalism and increase organizational performance, while allowing marketers to promote corporate activities among stakeholders (Han et al. 2019; Papadas et al. 2017). If employees’ values align with organizational values (i.e., values are shared), employees are more productive and more loyal towards the organization (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). Ethical values were also found to shape organizational culture and positively impact the organizational commitment of employees (Hunt et al. 1989). In particular, sustainability-related strategic planning (including the definition of relevant values) can inspire employees to adopt sustainable leadership practices (Morsing and Oswald 2009). This is why organizational values should be integrated into human resource management-related policies and practices in order to influence employees (Kerwin et al. 2014b).

Gehman et al. (2013) described in their value work theory how organizational values emerge and how organizations can perform values in practice to achieve a value discourse among stakeholders. The so-called “values practices” are “sayings and doings in organizations that articulate and accomplish what is normatively right and wrong, good or bad, for its own sake” (Gehman et al. 2013, p. 84). Values practices are manifested organizational norms, which are built in organizational culture, ethics or sustainability. “Values work” describe what is happening when “values practices emerge and are performed” (Gehman et al. 2013, p. 102) as well as the consequences of these performed practices. Gehman et al. (2013) outlined further how “values work processes”, that is, one of many “kinds of value work involved” (p. 105) can be described, referring to four domains: 1) dealing with pockets of concern; 2) knotting local concerns into action networks; 3) performing values practices; and 4) circulating values discourse (*Tab. 1*). These processes are useful in identifying the work “at any moment as values practices emerge and are performed, as well as the effects values practices perform and provoke as they work through an organization” (p. 102). Therefore, the theory of values work allows investigating how organizational and individual values are being shared over time. The present study relies on the theory of values work to explore how a professional sport organization’s sustainability-directed organizational values emerged and how they may promote the consumption of plant-based diets among fans, that is, an important area of sustainable action in the sport venue context.

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| Values work process | Definition |
| Dealing with pockets of concern | Stakeholders “address local, emergent pockets of concern” – these efforts serve “as temporary fixes” (p. 102). |
| Knotting local concerns into action networks | “Stakeholders and their value concerns [.] knotted together” – “bring[ing] together not only social and material elements, but individual and collective elements as well” (pp. 102–103). |
| Performing values practices | “Performativity […] – values practices actively intervene in situations, contributing to the enactment of normative realities” (p. 104). |
| Circulating values discourse | “A semiotic resource for justifying the assessment and proliferation of values practices in disparate parts of an organization” (p. 104) |

*Tab. 1: Values work processes according to Gehman et al. (2013)*

Sustainable organizational values are particularly relevant to sport organizations regarding institutional expectations and strategic considerations (Babiak and Trendafilova 2011). First, within the sport industry (particularly team sports), environmentally sustainable behaviours can have a big impact on relevant sustainability outcomes. For example, competitions with other teams require team members’ transportation to different places (often done by plane to reduce the time that athletes sit when traveling; here, team footprint can be reduced); fans traveling to home and away games and producing high amounts of waste and requiring energy for transportation (here, visitor footprint can be reduced); there are many under-used venues (e.g., only during home games) and requirement of high amounts of energy during game day (here, the venue footprint can be reduced) (Alm et al. 2016; Collins and Flynn 2008; Dolf and Teehan 2015; Triantafyllidis et al. 2018). Second, teams and athletes are important role models in today’s societies (Carlson and Donavan 2013). The sport setting thus provides a context, in which learning and education about sustainability can take place (Casper et al. 2014). Third, the UN acknowledged the particular role of sports for promoting sustainability and introduced sport-industry specific actions (e.g., the Sports for Climate Action on the Race to Zero, which has been signed by teams such as Forest Green Rovers and Liverpool F.C.). The signatories commit to five principles: 1) undertake systematic efforts to promote greater environmental responsibility; 2) reduce overall climate impact; 3) educate for climate action; 4) promote sustainable and responsible consumption through communication; and 5) advocate for climate action through communication (United Nations n.d.). To accept the role to contribute to sustainability in general and help reach the Paris Climate Change Agreement goals in particular, sport organizations should specify organizational values that fully embrace the sustainability concept.

Forest Green Rovers provide an example of a sustainably focused sport organization. Since Dale Vince became owner of the team, sustainability has been central to the team’s strategic operations. They were recognised as the world’s first carbon-neutral (United Nations 2019) and vegan football club (The Vegan Society 2017). Due to the changes in their daily operations (e.g., provision of vegan-only food; reduction of the team’s carbon footprint via several activities), the team gained attention from around the world and redefined their image (Samuel et al. 2022). Parry et al. (2019) highlight that Forest Green Rovers were able to overcome challenges to promote healthy food options and were successful in influencing dietary behaviours of fans. Yet, they do not provide evidence why behavioural change in customers occur. In the following, we examine the organizational values that may promote the consumption of plant-based diets among fans.

**4. Overview of the present studies**

This study adopts a single case study, mixed-methods design, using qualitative and quantitative data to investigate Forest Green Rovers organizational values related to promoting plant-based diet consumption among fans. The approach builds on qualitative and/or quantitative data, assesses whether the findings from different approaches match, and thus gains deep understanding of the case (Guetterman and Fetters 2018). The approach serves the research purpose of investigating how organizational values allow organizations to promote plant-based diets among customers, which is driven by a real-world context (Yin 2014). Forest Green Rovers were selected as a case due to the implementation of vegan food initiatives as part of their ongoing pro-environmental activities. Forest Green Rovers are the first vegan professional soccer club in the world, providing solely vegan food at their sport venues and to players. The sport organization markets their plant-based food option at their venues, explains the benefits of plant-based diets to game-day visitors, and shares videos and photos of plant-based activities and offerings via social media channels, cooperating with sponsors that provide plant-based food options. Thereby, the organization increases mass media interest and coverage (Sport Positive Leagues 2023), allowing them to reach out to more than three billion people since 2017 (United Nations 2019). The concept of sustainability is deeply anchored in the organizational values of the team.

First, a qualitative document analysis was conducted to explore Forest Green Rovers’ values work processes towards fans. Second, a quantitative survey of a convenience sample of Forest Green Rovers fans was conducted to assess whether the behavioural change to adopt a plant-based diet among these fans is positively associated with team value internalization and, hence, fans’ intention to eat plant-based foods in the future. We investigate the following hypotheses:

*H1: There is a positive relationship between the adoption of a plant-based diet and internalization of team values.*

*H2: There is a positive relationship between internalization of team values and fans’ intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future.*

*H3: Internalization of team values mediates the relation between the adoption of a plant-based diet and fans’ intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future.*

In what follows, we first present the results of the document analysis (Study 1) before we present the results of the survey (Study 2).

**5. Study 1**

* 1. **Method**

*Document search and selection*

First, documents were scanned, selected, and appraised (Bowen 2009). The procedure was based on the relevance of the documents (focus on sustainability activities that stimulate or implement change toward plant-based food offerings at Forest Green Rovers). Duplicates (mostly replicated reports by news sites) were eliminated. Videos and audio files were transcribed so that all documents were available in a text format. After this procedure, 44 documents (56,057 words in total) were examined to explore Forest Green Rovers’ values work processes toward fans. The documents provide a rich context and data on what happened at the Forest Green in terms of change for sustainable development. All authors read the documents. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the documents that were included in the analysis.

*Data analysis*

A deductive-inductive approach was applied. By going through an iterative process and re-reading, we explored what Forest Green Rovers do to engage fans and make them connect to their values. This approach is in line with Yin’s (2014) procedure for analysing case studies. The organization of important information into categories and the assignment of categories to themes in regard to the central phenomenon of the study were important steps in the document analysis (Bowen 2009). All documents were analysed using MAXQDA. The values work process framework from Gehman et al. (2013) was used to deductively derive themes for the document analysis, which served as core concepts for the data analysis (Azungah 2018). Sentences and paragraphs were inductively coded, categorized, and then assigned to the respective themes.

Initially, 22 categories were identified by an open, analytical coding procedure. By going back and forth through all documents, sentences and paragraphs were coded based on the relevance for the research questions (Azungah 2018; Yin 2014). The initial lists of codes were compared, discussed, consolidated, and finally refined until no new codes emerged and no existing codes were eliminated any more. In a next step, codes belonging together were grouped into categories. All members of the research team engaged in this procedure and the final coding and categories was agreed upon to describe the values work processes of Forest Green Rovers. We named and defined the refined categories accordingly. In total, there are 17 categories that resulted from the final exercise. Finally, these categories were named, defined, and aligned to the respective, deductively derived themes (revealing one additional theme compared to Gehman et al.’s [2013] processes: overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system). *Tab. 2* presents an overview of the five themes, categories and example statements.

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| Values work process | Categories | Example citation or quote |
| Dealing with pockets of concern1 | Red meat ban  Provision of vegan food only on-site to team members  Provision of vegan food only at concession stands | “We did it over a period, a few years. First, we knocked red meat off the menu, day one here, I saw it, stopped it. Then it was white meat, then fish.” (FIFA 2022, 13:44-13:52; please note that FIFA reported on Forest Green Rovers) |
| Knotting local concerns into action networks1 | Collaboration with like-minded partners | “Its current crop of partners includes: Grundon, a family-owned waste management firm with aspirations to recycle 100 % of its waste; Quorn, which helped the club achieve its vegan-only menu; Sea Shepherd, an international non-profit focused on marine conservation; and Ecotricity, the renewable energy company founded by Vince, which is the majority owner and principal sponsor of the club.” (Campelli 2020) |
| Performing values practices1 | Highlighting beliefs and values  Offering practicable solutions to opposers  Use of practices as communication platform  Reporting and monitoring practices | “Now, we are home to the first meat-free football menu. We did it for strong environmental and health reasons. We’re working to the principles of local, seasonal, fresh and organic food wherever possible.” (Ward 2013) |
| Circulating values discourse1 | Life-changing moments  Reinforcement via trials  Influence on opponents  Changes in the fan base  Resolving discourses | “It’s funny enough that it's the big question that we get asked by all other clubs that are interested in what we do: ‘How on earth’ they say ‘can we take our fans or our club vegan without getting lynched or having a riot or something like that’. It’s a funny conversation. It’s also the issue that’s given us all of the publicity. The fact that we’re a vegan football club and just how improbable that seems that you can combine those two things. I mean you know this is football it's a kind of a macho world, isn’t it? But you know what we’ve found is that football fans are just normal people just ordinary people. Not really different to anybody else. So, I’d say food, food is a really quick, easy, big change to make and that's what I tell everybody.” (Animal Rebellion 2021, 9:10–9:50) |
| Overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system2 | Systemic approach  Value internalization  Relatedness between sustainable and sporting success  Player beliefs about healing power of vegan food | “I would say our fans don’t just tolerate this change that we’ve made (toward vegan food offerings only; *added by the authors*), they’re very proud of it they’ve embraced it and I’m really pleased with that in particular.” (Animal Rebellion 2021, 6:22-6:30). “In fact, many of the fans themselves are replicating their team’s green vision by becoming vegan, buying electric cars, and living more sustainably.” (United Nations 2019) |

*Notes*. 1 See Tab. 1 for definitions of the process. 2 The definition for this new process is as follows: creation of an overarching value system that overcomes barriers and allows fans to internalize team values.

*Tab. 2: Values work processes identified for Forest Green Rovers in Study 1*

* 1. **Findings and discussion**

The analysis revealed five themes: (1) dealing with pockets of concern; (2) knotting local concerns into action networks; (3) performing values practices; (4) circulating values discourse; as well as, in extension to Gehman et al.’s (2013) conceptualization, (5) overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system. In what follows, we briefly describe these themes.

*Dealing with pockets of concern*

When Forest Green Rovers’ team owner Dale Vince became the club’s chairman in 2010, he immediately acted to address what he felt needed to be changed immediately. This is visible in the change of the concession menus, where red meat was taken off first. This action was only the beginning of a transformation to become a vegan football club.

“When we got involved in the club in 2010 it was like a rescue mission and we thought that we should bring the work we do at Ecotricity into the world of football and speak to a new audience. We knew we needed to make changes around energy, transport and food. It’s like a universal slide rule; you can hold it up to the life of an individual person, a sports club, an organisation of any size – energy, transport and food are probably responsible for about 80 % of their carbon emissions.” (Campelli 2019a)

Interestingly, the club did not only target fans, but also players, as can be seen in the following statement made by Vince:

“Day one here of being in charge of the football club, I bumped into my first thing. We were serving a beef lasagne to our players, and I sat down immediately with the chef and the manager and said, we can’t do this, so we took red meat off our menu on day one of being in charge.” (Bloomberg Originals 2022, 5:00–5:15)

*Knotting local concerns into action networks*

The action network that was built up over time mostly included sponsors with a similar mission, allowing Forest Green to attract sponsors “that other clubs at our level won’t get, don’t get.” (Bloomberg Originals 2022, 12:38–12:42). The Economist (2022) wrote that, “its philosophy has attracted sponsors like Oatly, a non-lactose milk company, and Innocent, which sells fruit smoothies.” *Tab. 2* presents examples of other similar-minded sponsors. Even the grounds keeper (grounds serviceman) is part of the network, as can be seen here:

Adam Witchell [.] joined the club four years ago after earning a reputation in the industry for his plant-based approach to feeding nutrients into his soil and combating the spread of fungus. (…) What has been surprising, at least for Witchell himself, is how his life has changed as a result of this union. “I never used to eat vegan food but my whole family now eats vegan meals at home,” Witchell said. “I drive an electric car, I’m conscious of my carbon footprint, I make sure I know where all the plastic I use ends up.” Witchell continued: “It’s incredible what can happen when you have a leader like Dale. You get swept up by his passion. This football club has got so many people thinking about the environment.” (Gallan 2019)

*Performing values practices*

With the action network in place, the club performed several values practices, that is, all the activities involved to become a vegan football team. These practices can be seen at various levels, such as in the reactions of fans and players, the employees, and the media coverage. For example, one employee said the following:

“We went vegan. People said food sales are going to drop. But no, fantastic. They have kind of rocketed.” (FIFA 2022, 19:55–20:00)

Dale Vince further explained:

“We’re just setting the menu and every organization does that. We’re doing it according to our principles and we’ll explain to you what’s wrong with red meat from the environmental, the animal rights and the human health perspective as well. So, we took our fans on a journey from that point with that big kind of bold decision right at the beginning and everything that we’ve done we’ve explained to them and explained the reason why and we’ve shown them how uh you know they can do the same things at home.” (Animal Rebellion 2021, 5:57–6:22)

Yet, the practices were subject to opposition not only from their own fans, but also from fans of opposing teams. Especially, Vince Dale was perceived negatively by some fans, who did not share his beliefs and were sceptical towards vegan food; also, some fans claimed that “it’s all for PR purposes” (Campelli 2018b).

*Circulating values discourse*

The justification and proliferation of values practices can be seen in some example statements provided in *Tab. 2*. Often, discourses were around food trials and taste, as can be seen in the following statement:

“When we went vegetarian and then vegan some of the supporters didn’t like it, because traditionally football supporters like their burgers and their sausage rolls, and whatever. But when the quality was sampled, most people have come on side and a lot of people really do enjoy the vegan food there. I’m vegan when I travel with the club normally as the players are. But no, I do meat occasionally, mainly white meat, but I love vegan food. Especially that cooked by the chef Jada of Forest Green. It’s excellent and we find that with a lot of away supporters and certainly visiting directors, they are very praiseworthy about the food that’s served up.” (Football Daily 2019, 4:25–5:10)

Dale Vince explained in an interview that is important to try the vegan food to overcome preconceptions as he recognized that “lots of [.] fans have tried it and they’ve gone vegetarian and vegan themselves at home. Our players have done the same” (Football Daily 2019, 6:09–6:14).

With these practices, however, the club may have lost some fans who were still not happy with the decision. Also, the club may have recruited new fans, as can be seen in the following statement:

“So those changes were quite hard, I think, and I think some of the fan base moved away from the club as a consequence of that, but we’ve introduced a whole new set of supporters and followers who really like what the club stand for now.” (Bloomberg Originals 2022, 5:58–6:15)

*Overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system*

The systemic approach to sustainability can be seen in the following statement:

“All-vegan menus. An organic pitch. A current stadium powered by renewable energy and plans to build a new, all-timber stadium designed by the studio of legendary architect Zaha Hadid. Forest Green Rovers has the quirky yet uncompromising characteristics to achieve cult status, especially in the eyes of those who care deeply about environmental stewardship as well as the beautiful game.” (Campelli 2018b)

In regard to plant-based food in particular, there are various statements that showcase that sustainable team values have been internalized by important fan groups, players, and staff members. Even team managers from opposing teams showed interest in adopting food items on their concession-stand menus. The importance of the concept of team value internalization can be seen in the exemplary statements in *Tab. 2*, as well as in Dale Vince’s observation that “he’s seeing more and more players and fans adopting those values into their own lives.” (Sharpe 2022). The statements reveal that fans often “embrace” and “replicate” what the team stands for and aims for in regard to the promotion of plant-based food (see *Tab. 2*).

To conclude, we can state that Gehman et al.’s (2013) conceptualization of values work processes helps describe how Forest Green Rovers present themselves—in terms of organizational values—to fans. Yet, we identified another theme: overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system. When such a systematic approach is taken by an organization, value internalization, that is, the extent to which values and behaviours of organizations are accepted and adopted in one’s own value system (Kelman 2006), seems to be crucial to stimulate behavioural changes in daily life, such as the adoption of a plant-based diet. To assess whether not only the team, but also fans, changed their behaviours, and to find out whether team value internalization helps explain behavioural intentions of fans to adopt plant-based food in the future in their daily life, we conducted a survey. The method and the results of the study will be presented in what follows.

**6. Study 2**

* 1. **Method**

*Procedure*

A questionnaire was distributed to fans of Forest Green Rovers, using the online fan forum of Forest Green Rovers, providing a link to the study in an email newsletter of Forest Green Rovers Supporters Club, and making Forest Green Rovers fan Facebook group members aware of the study. We aimed for a sample size that was as large as possible, but with a minimum of 78 fans to meet the sample-size requirements outlined by Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) for detecting mediation effects for percentile bootstrapping, assuming a medium effect size (*f²* = .39) for the path from the independent variable to the mediator as well as for the mediator to the dependent variable (power = .80).

*Participants*

In total, 111 participants filled out the questionnaire. Four participants were excluded due to missing information. Thus, the final sample consists of 107 participants (*Tab. 3*). The sample mainly consists of male fans (similar to what was found in previous studies; Casper et al. 2017; Harris and Ogbonna 2008). A Monte Carlo power analysis for mediation models was completed. It reveals that the sample size of 107 participants leads to a projected power of .82, meeting the recommended level of .80 (Schoemann et al. 2017). Thus, the survey was ended when we had collected date from 111 participants. No compensation was provided to the fans, but they were offered to be informed about the results of the study. This might explain the relatively small sample size.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Characteristics | Frequency (%) |
| Gender (male) | 86.9 |
| Age (up until 20 years)  (21-30 years)  (31-40 years)  (41-50 years)  (51-60 years)  (61-70 years)  (71 years or more) | 0.9  6.5  12.1  13.1  21.5  30.8  15.0 |
| Education (Primary school)  (Secondary school)  (Trades school)  (Bachelor)  (Master’s degree) | 5.6  30.8  11.2  34.6  17.8 |
| Income (£25,000 or less)  (£25,001 - £50,000)  (£50,001 - £75,000)  (£75,001 - £100,000)  (£100,001 or more)  (I prefer not to answer) | 29.9  42.1  12.1  2.8  1.9  11.2 |
| Hometown  (Gloucestershire)  (Nailsworth)  (London)  (South West England)  (England)  (Great Britain but not England)  (Outside Great Britain) | 44.9  12.1  5.6  7.5  8.4  4.7  16.8 |
| Dietary preferences before becoming a Forest Green Rovers fan  (Omnivore)  (Vegan/Vegetarian) | 76.6  23.4 |
| Dietary preferences after becoming a Forest Green Rovers  (Omnivore)  (Vegan/Vegetarian) | 45.8  54.2 |

*Tab. 3: Sample characteristics for Study 2*

All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Faculty Board of the university, which acts as the local ethics committee for studies outside the Faculty of Medicine and approved the study, and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments.

*Measures*

*Tab. 4* provides an overview of items and variables used in the study. First, participants were asked about their current diet ([mostly] vegan/vegetarian or omnivore). [2] Next, they were asked to state whether their diet was vegan/vegetarian or omnivore before they became fan of Forest Green Rovers. This allows us to assess whether the diet had changed toward vegan/vegetarian (coded 1) or whether it remained the same (coded 0). [3] The four-item value internalization scale was taken from Inoue and Kent (2012) (*α* = .90). The five-item scale of environmental personal norms was taken from Scherbaum et al. (2008) (*α* = .82). The variable is an important descriptor, as identified in previous studies on sustainable food consumption (e.g., Floress et al. 2022). We therefore included the variable as another predictor. Behavioural intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future was assessed with four items adapted from Povey et al. (2001) (*α* = .88).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variables | Items | Mean | SD |
| **Diet change** | Were you vegan or vegetarian before you became a fan of the Forest Green Rovers?\*  Are you vegan or vegetarian now?\* | **.31**  23.4%  54.2% | **.46**  76.6%  45.8% |
| **Internalization of team values** | What [the team] stands for is important to me.  If the values of [the team] were different, I would not be as attached to them.  The reason I prefer [the team] to others is because of what they stand for, their values.  I find that my values and [the team’s] values are very similar. | **5.07**  5.72  5.54  4.82  4.21 | **1.58**  1.65  1.44  1.99  2.07 |
| **Environmental personal norms** | Conserving natural resources is important to me.  Conserving natural resources is not my problem. (reverse-coded)  I should help conserve natural resources.  Sport and recreational organizations should conserve natural resources.  I have a responsibility to conserve natural resources. | **3.74**  3.79  3.79  3.73  3.71  3.69 | **.40**  .44  .50  .56  .53  .59 |
| **Intention to eat a plant-based diet** | I intend to eat a more plant-based diet.  I intend to eat a vegetarian diet.  I intend to eat a diet which contains meat. (reverse-coded)  I intend to eat a purely plant-based diet. | **4.01**  5.34  3.98  3.71  3.03 | **1.76**  1.64  2.18  2.15  2.19 |

*Notes*. SD = Standard deviation; A seven-point rating scale was applied for internalization of team values and the intention to adopt a plant-based diet. A four-point rating scale was applied for environmental personal norms; \*Values are presented in percent (*n* = 107).

*Tab. 4:**Variables, means, and standard deviations for Study 2*

Scale anchors as reported in original studies were used. Team value internalization and behavioural intention to eat a plant-based diet were measured via a seven-point rating scale (anchored at 1 [lowest rating] and 7 [highest rating]). Environmental personal norm was measured via a four-point rating scale (anchored at 1 [lowest rating] and 4 [highest rating]).

*Model and analysis*

SPSS 29.0 was applied to calculate means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations as well as to examine associations between variables. To test whether the change toward a plant-based diet when fans became a fan of the team is positively associated with team value internalization, and whether the latter mediates the relation to fans’ intention to eat plant-based foods in the future, a mediation model was tested. We used Hayes’ (2018) PROCESS model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap samples.

Before the analysis, a confirmatory factor analysis was performed using Mplus to assess the measurement model and examine the validity and reliability of the latent variables. The model fit was assessed via several indices: chi-square degree of freedom ratio (χ2/df), which should be less 3, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), which should have a value less than .08, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), which should have a value less than .08, and the comparative fit index, which is acceptable when greater than .9, were considered (Hoe 2008). Further, discriminant and convergent validity as well as reliability of the latent variables were assessed. Construct reliability (CR) should be above .70 and average variance extracted (AVE) above .50 (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

* 1. **Findings and discussion**

The model fit was satisfactory (*χ2/df* = 84,14/62 (1.36), *p* < .001; CFI = .97; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .058 [90% CI: .02; .09]; SRMR = .078). The CRs of the resulting factors were above .70 and all AVE values of the used factors were above .50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). *Tab. 5* provides an overview of the correlation between factor, AVEs, and CRs.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Factors** | **CA** | **CR** | **AVE** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** |
| 1 Change toward a plant-based diet | / | / | / | **/** |  |  |  |
| 2 Internalization of team values | .90 | .91 | .72 | .27\* | **.85** |  |  |
| 3 Environmental personal norms | .82 | .83 | .52 | .07 | .30\*\*\* | **.72** |  |
| 4 Intention to eat a plant-based diet | .88 | .91 | .66 | .12 | .63\*\*\* | .30\*\*\* | **.81** |

*Notes*. CA = Cronbach’s alpha, CR = Construct reliability, AVE = Average variance extracted; square roots of AVE are shown on diagonal (values in bold); values outside the diagonal represent the correlations between the constructs (row 1-4); \* *p* < .05, \*\* *p* < .01, \*\*\* *p* < .001 (two-tailed)

*Tab. 5: Correlations between variables as well as evidence for convergent and discriminant validity (Study 2)*

The model explains 40.7% of variance in behavioural intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future and 15.3% of the variance in team value internalization. *Tab. 6* provides an overview of the results of the model testing. The relationship between change toward a plant-based diet and team value internalization was positive and significant (*β* = .85, SE = .31, *p* = .007). Also, environmental personal norms positively relate to team value internalization (*β* = 1.13, SE = .36, *p* = .002). Consistent with our assumptions, team value internalization relates positively with intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future (*β* = .67, SE = .10, *p* < .001). The indirect effect of change toward a plant-based diet on intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future is positive and significant (*β* = .57, SE = .20, CI [.201; .987]). Thus, team value internalization acts as a mediator and all three hypotheses are supported.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Direct effects** | **β** | **SE** | **CI 95%** |
| Change toward a plant-based diet → Team value internalization | .85\*\* | .31 | [.235; 1.457] |
| Environmental personal norms → Team value internalization | 1.13\*\* | .36 | [.420; 1.841] |
| Change toward a plant-based diet → Intention to eat a plant-based diet | -.17 | .30 | [-.766; .421] |
| Team value internalization → Intention to eat a plant-based diet | .67\*\*\* | .10 | [.490; .854] |
| Environmental personal norms → Intention to eat a plant-based diet | .52 | .35 | [-.182; 1.212] |
| **Indirect effect** |  |  |  |
| Change toward a plant-based diet → Team value internalization → Intention to eat a plant-based diet | .57 | .20 | [.201; .987] |

*Notes*. *n* = 107; \* *p* < .05; \*\* *p* < .01; \*\*\* *p* < .001 (two-tailed).

*Tab. 6: Evidence on the mediating effect of internalization of team values (Study 2)*

We note that environmental personal norms are not associated significantly with the intention to eat a plant-based diet in the future (*β* =.52, SE = .35, *p* = .15). The direct path from change toward a plant-based diet to the dependent variable is not significant (*β* = -.17, SE = .30, *p* = .57), indicating full mediation for the present variables (MacKinnon et al. 2007).

1. **General Discussion**

**7.1. Theoretical implications**

The goal of the study was to examine the role of Forest Green Rovers’ organizational values to promote the consumption of plant-based diets. The study contributes to existing research in the following ways. First, Gehman et al. (2013) values work processes are extended by a fifth domain, as identified in the qualitative part of the study (the document analysis): overcoming value constraints to build a holistic value system. This is accompanied by internalization-of-values practices by customers. Here, values of an organization are adopted in one’s own value system (Kelman 2006). In the quantitative part of the study (the survey), we found that value internalization is crucial to explain behavioural intentions to act sustainably (eat plant-based food). Inoue and Kent (2012) also noted a mediator role of team value internalization.

Second, to understand values work processes in the domain of sustainable organizational actions, it is important to describe how concerns emerge. At Forest Green Rovers, local concerns about current behaviours (e.g., electricity provision, waste management, and food provision) were knotted together and tackled from the start when Dale Vince became team owner. They attracted new sponsors focusing on similar aspects and communicated their role-model approach to a wider audience, potentially allowing them to attract new fans. As a consequence, values practices were performed by Forest Green Rovers. Through discourse, values were circulated among stakeholders. While the implementation of vegan-only offerings was opposed by some stakeholders, most likely due to eating routines or meat enjoyment (Pohjolainen et al. 2015), the club explained their position to promote plant-based diets to create a common understanding for the necessity of the changes (Parry et al. 2019). Such internal marketing communication was needed to get support for the change for the better. As the document analysis revealed, setting the menu to vegan-only offerings helped Forest Green Rovers inform and educate their fans and stakeholders about the benefits of plant-based food. Forest Green Rovers were able to stimulate the value discourse. Many fans started to sample new offerings, which allowed them to assess the quality, and mostly enjoyed plant-based food trials. Additionally, by offering solely plant-based food options to fans, Forest Green Rovers may have created a social tipping point, encouraging fans to change their dietary behaviours in the long run (Aschemann-Witzel and Schulze 2023). This conceptualization of values work processes agrees with Gehman et al.’s (2013) conceptualization. The knowledge of how an organization, via changing processes and offerings towards sustainability, can promote sustainable development among stakeholders and customers. By the integration of sustainable organizational values in their marketing efforts, Forest Green Rovers were able to build up relationships with important stakeholders, such as sponsors and media, and increase their organizational performance, according to self-reports (Han et al. 2019; Papadas et al. 2017).

Lastly, Forest Green Rovers’ systematic approach to adopt plant-based foods helped overcome value constraints and build a holistic value system. Establishing sustainable values and organizational culture likely made most fans internalize these values into their own value system (Galpin et al. 2015; Kelman 2006; Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). This highlights the downstream consequences of important sustainability practices, such as food trials, embedded in a holistic value system, to stimulate behavioural change in fans. In our case, plant-based food consumption in the future was the relevant outcome variable.

**7.2. Managerial implications**

The present research highlights how sport organization managers can influence fans’ (stated) eating behaviour. By creating a holistic sustainable value system and allowing stakeholders to internalize organizational values (Kelman 2006), sport organizations may direct fans toward eating more plant-based foods. While the implementation of a holistic sustainable value system is a long-term process, other organizations can refer to the values work processes and assess where they fall on the continuum, and then act accordingly to become more environmentally friendly. Especially in sports, a field in which brands are often perceived as similar (Stadler-Blank et al. 2018), promoting sustainable values may help clubs to get in a prime position for sponsors with similar values (Cornwell and Koenigstorfer 2017). Additionally, certain fan segments might be attracted by the club’s positioning around environmentalism (Casper et al. 2017). Forest Green Rovers are a salient exemplar for how a sport organization can provide sustainable and healthy food options at game days, which allow fans to experience, and eventually enjoy, plant-based food options (Lea et al. 2006; Parry et al. 2019), with important consequences for behavioural sustainable actions in the future.

**7.3. Limitations and outlook**

One key limitation is the use of cross-sectional data in Study 2. It would be beneficial to collect longitudinal data and find out in how far fans internalize team values, and change their diets, over time. Yet, change within organizations takes place over the course of years and changes in team ownership are often not announced to the public (and hence researchers). Thus, future studies may use insider knowledge and accompany teams that change toward sustainable development due to critical incidents, such as change in team ownership. Also, the sample is not representative for all Forest Green Rovers fans. Particularly, a focus on individuals who became fans since (or because of) Vince Dale became owner of the team would have been desirable. In our study, unfortunately, we did not ask fans to remember exactly when and why they became fans of the organization. Asking participants these questions will be valuable to more exactly trace back when and why behavioural changes may have occurred. Future research may assess these variables in empirical studies. Another key limitation is the reliance on insights from one sport organization only. Thus, the generalizability of the findings remains unknown. In future research, event studies may be used to assess the influence of critical incidents, such as change in team ownership, on sustainability indicators. Such event studies may be conducted inside or outside the team sport setting.

**8. Conclusion**

Sport organizations can encourage plant-based food consumption among fans by promoting sustainable organizational values to them. Thus, sport organizations and their athletes may be important role models, even though many sport events and venues are not environmentally sustainable. Before organizations engage in shaping sustainable values, they are recommended to identify and link stakeholder concerns. Values practices can tackle concerns and create a value discourse. This helps overcome barriers and infuse sustainable organizational values within the organization and among stakeholders. The results of this study are meaningful for organizations outside the sports industry, too. By adopting and implementing sustainable organizational values, organizations might leverage their marketing activities directed at own employees and relevant stakeholders outside the organization as well as make a positive contribution to sustainable development.

**Notes**

[1] Indeed, meat production is one driver of environmental problems, particularly against the background of the increasing global population, and is known to promote the loss of biodiversity, climate change, and the degradation and pollution of land and water (Vermeulen et al., 2012).

[2] In agreement with the World Health Organization’s (2021) definition of plant-based diets, mostly vegan/vegetarian and vegan/vegetarian were considered as one category.

[3] None of the participants stated that their diet had changed from vegan/vegetarian to omnivore.

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