

Article

Fan Responses of Sponsored Environmental Sustainability Initiatives

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Abstract: The sport sector is advancing its efforts to be environmentally friendly. These efforts now include corporate sponsored environmental initiatives, yet fans' responsiveness to such efforts remains unexamined. Specifically, in this study, the corporate-sponsored environmental initiatives of a college athletic department with an established history of environmental commitments were examined to evaluate the influence of a point of attachment, sport brand-sustainability fit, and receptivity to messaging on the sport organization's desired outcomes of the campaign (i.e., sustainability behavioral, support for environmental initiative corporate partner). Data were collected from college football fans of an institution in the United States Midwest region using an internet-based survey after the 2019 football season ($N = 548$). We found that most of our hypotheses were supported. Specifically, attachment to athletics, athletics/sustainability fit, and ascription of responsibility to athletics explained 52.7% of the variance of receptivity to messaging from athletics. In turn, receptivity to sustainable messaging and behaviors explained 45.0% of the support for corporate partners. Our results show that sport practitioners should evaluate the ascription of responsibility their fans place on the sport organization to be environmentally responsible, increasing the receptivity of environmental messages and desired outcomes from such efforts. In addition, this study shows the versatility and applicability of the model to actual sponsored environmental sustainability campaigns of a sport organization.

Keywords: environmental sustainability; sport consumer behavior; corporate partners; sponsorship; sustainable behavioral intentions; college sport fans

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1. Introduction

The United Nations Sport for Climate Action Framework seeks to reduce the sport sector's environmental impact while leveraging sports organizations' social platforms to encourage fans to act on sustainable behaviors while attending sporting events and in their everyday lives. Following this directive, sport organizations' environmental efforts have become more sophisticated and have expanded into all aspects of their operations to reduce their environmental impact [1,2]. Academic research has followed this trend and focused on how sport organizations can leverage their platform to encourage sustainable behaviors at events and in everyday life [3–8]. However, more recent trends in the progression of the sport sector's environmental movement have featured corporate sponsors of environmental initiatives to subsidize and financially support their ecological initiatives (e.g., Ball Aluminum and the Super Bowl, Adidas Ocean Plastics, and the University of Miami) [7,9]. However, limited research has examined the effectiveness of these campaigns based on key organizational performance indicators (e.g., pro-environmental behaviors and support of the corporate sponsor). By filling this gap, more sport organizations can leverage fan data to attract more sponsors to financially support new and existing environmental initiatives forwarding the environmental movement in the sport sector.

To this end, McCullough and Trail [9] used a national sample to test an extension of the SSCEM [6,7] that incorporated additional consumer behavior factors (i.e., fit, responsiveness to messaging, ascription of responsibility) to assess sponsorship social and financial key performance indicators (KPIs) associated with the introduction of sustainability campaigns featuring corporate sponsors. They found that the extension to the sustainable sport consumer evaluation model (SSCEM) fit well. Still, they noted testing the extended model with a specific sport organization's sponsored environmental initiative was necessary. We further stress the need for this examination because of data inconsistencies and to establish boundaries of the application of the SSCEM. Specifically, prior researchers have found mixed results when examining aspects of the original and extended SSCEM [6,9,10]. Furthermore, McCullough and Trail [9] primarily intended to evaluate the extended model's fit. As a result, they did not assess actual sponsored campaigns. Again, this stresses the necessity to demonstrate the practical value of the extended SSCEM. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the model beyond a hypothetical scenario and demonstrate its versatility in an actual corporate-sponsored sport organization's environmental sustainability campaign.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to further examine the applicability of McCullough and Trail's [9] extension of the SSCEM [6,7] by examining the experience fans had with a specific sport organization's sponsored environmental initiative. To this end, we have two objectives. The first objective is to examine the boundary conditions and utility of McCullough and Trail's extension of the SSCEM [6,7] by refining the analysis to a specific context of college football fans' experience with an athletic department's sponsored environmental initiatives. This athletic department has an established history of environmental sustainability initiatives, is a signatory of the Sport for Climate Action Framework, and launched sponsored environmental initiatives. Our second objective is to evaluate the applicability of the extended SSCEM to assess active corporate-sponsored environmental sustainability initiatives based on the sport organization's defined key performance indicators (i.e., pro-environmental behaviors; support of corporate partners). McCullough and Trail [9] only evaluated behavioral intentions. However, we found that the model fit well and found significant relationships predicting sustainable behaviors and support for corporate green sponsors. The findings from this study support the model to evaluate practical sponsorship activations surrounding a sport organization's environmental sustainability campaigns. Further, the findings contribute to our understanding to evaluate the boundaries of the extended SSCEM's application and evaluate data inconsistencies within the context of a college athletic department.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Sport Sustainability Campaign Evaluation Model

Sport management researchers have examined the utility of sport organizations to promote environmentally sustainable messages that encourage sustainable behaviors at sporting events [5,10–12] and in everyday life [6,7,13]. This research was consistent in following industry practice. Environmental sustainability efforts within the sport sector evolved in their sophistication and engagement with fans, from raising awareness of environmental initiatives at events to encouraging environmental advocacy [2,14]. More recently, Trail and McCullough [6] noted that prior research evaluated environmental initiatives post-hoc and did not indicate actively informing these campaigns. Thus, Trail and McCullough [6,7] created the sport sustainability campaign evaluation model (SSCEM) to create, communicate, and assess such campaigns. Trail and McCullough have demonstrated the fit of this model in part [11] and in full [6,7,14], as well as other researchers [10], in a variety of contexts (i.e., participant and spectator sport) and across a variety of sustainability campaigns (e.g., recycling behaviors, sustainable transportation, carbon offsets). However, as the sport industry further advanced its environmental efforts to include corporate partners, McCullough and Trail [9] extended the SSCEM [6,7] to incorporate

aspects of corporate partnerships. Thus, additional factors are necessary to evaluate these campaigns through key performance indicators (i.e., social and financial) to include these evolving dynamics in the industry and assess the impact on corporate sponsorship.

McCullough and Trail [9] extended the SSCEM to incorporate factors to account for the sport industry's trend to include sponsors in environmental sustainability campaigns. This extended model addressed the increase of environmental sustainability focused sport sponsorships to evaluate these campaigns from the sport organization and corporate partner's perspective. In addition, the extended model filled gaps in the original SSCEM [6,7] that did not address sponsorship and consumer behavior related variables (i.e., perceived fit, receptivity to messaging, ascription of responsibility).

McCullough and Trail [9] used the values-beliefs-norms (VBN) theory of environmentalism [15]—a process model that strings values, beliefs, and pro-environmental norms to environmentally friendly behaviors—to inform their extension. Prior sport management literature also supported the use of VBN [13]. Based on this prior work, McCullough and Trail extended the SSCEM [6,7] to include team-sustainability fit, ascription of responsibility to the team, and receptivity to messaging from the team (Figure 1). Team-sustainability fit was added to determine its influence on fans' receptivity to messaging. Previous studies and the original SSCEM did not incorporate aspects of whether sport consumers (e.g., fans, participants) believed a strong fit exists between a sport brand and its environmental initiative. McCullough and Trail [9] show that an ocean plastics campaign will resonate better with fans in Miami, a coastal location, than Oklahoma City, a landlocked city and state.

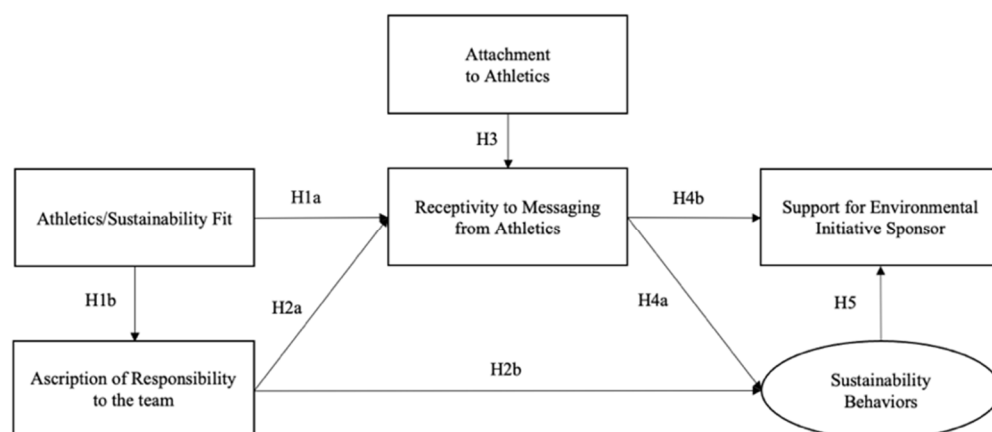


Figure 1. Tested extension of the sport sustainability campaign evaluation model (SSCEM).

Similarly, receptivity to messaging will also impact the success of a campaign and its commercial value with corporate partners. For example, spectators are less likely to engage in the campaign and support the corporate partner if they are not receptive to the messaging. Ascription of responsibility was added to assess fans' expectations of the sport organization to address environmental issues. This allows the model to assess consumer expectations.

McCullough and Trail [9] found that the extended model fit well among a national sample yet recommended that further research explore the use of a specific context of a particular sport organization's sponsored environmental initiative. Moreover, due to the nature of their study, McCullough and Trail only examined behavioral intentions (i.e., pro-environmental behavioral intentions, intention to support corporate sponsors). Therefore, the primary focus of their study was to examine the fit of the extended SSCEM. In this study, we examine the extended model within the context of an actively sponsored environmental initiative within an athletic department. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the interaction ticketholders of a college football team had with the athletic

department's sponsored environmental sustainability initiatives and the influence of this campaign on their sustainable behaviors and support for the corporate partner. Specifically, we examine the influence of a point of attachment (i.e., athletic department), sustainability-point of attachment fit, and receptivity to messaging on the sport organization's desired outcomes of the campaign (i.e., sustainability behaviors, support the corporate partner of the environmental). In the space below, we outline and justify the relationships between the factors of the extended SSCEM.

2.2. Environmental Sustainability Fit

Fit is a familiar concept used by researchers of sports consumer behavior to assess the congruence between a corporate brand and sport property [16]. Both corporate partners and sport properties strive for a strong fit between their respective brands in corporate partnerships to achieve higher levels of success. The stronger the congruency (i.e., fit or alignment) between property and brand, the more likely target markets will respond to advertisements, messaging, and other sponsorship outcomes [17,18], fulfilling the partnering brands' objectives and goals. Similarly, sport and sponsor brands benefit from a strong fit with corporate social responsibility initiatives [19–21].

Relatedly, McCullough and Trail [9] examined the fit between an environmental initiative and a sport organization. They noted that fit, a key component of sponsorship related research [17], was missing from prior studies examining environmental sustainability initiatives, including the original SSCEM [6,7]. Thus, they proposed that specific environmental initiatives align (i.e., fit) with a sport organization for various reasons (e.g., regional relevance, timeliness). For example, fans in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States may perceive a higher fit if their local sport organization was promoting renewable energy than fans from Texas—a state strongly dependent on fossil fuels. McCullough and Trail argued that VBN [17] explains this notion of fit among sport organizations and environmental initiatives. McCullough and Trail [9] noted that the perceived fit between the team's objective to be environmentally friendly and the fans' view of the sport organization itself is part of a person's ecological worldview. The brand-cause fit has been explored in other contexts [22]. Specifically, high-fit brand-cause initiatives increased beliefs about the cause and receptivity to messaging—conversely, low-fit brand-cause initiatives lower receptivity to messaging [23].

Brand-cause fit can also influence customers' expectations of an organization's response to specific issues [24]. Alcañiz and colleagues explored fit through consumer perceptions of the organization. The more the cause aligned, the more customers' expectations for the company to address the cause increased. They found that the higher the perceived fit, the more likely customers expected them to address the cause. Additionally, Lii and colleagues [25] results showed that a better brand-cause fit resulted in higher customer expectations to fulfill its responsibility. Thus, if fans believed that fossil fuels contribute to global warming resulting in climate change, they would more likely expect brands to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. In a sport context, McCullough and Trail [9] explored that the sport organization-sustainability fit predicted fans' ascription of responsibility to the team to be environmentally responsible. The stronger the fit fans perceived between their favorite sport organization and environmental sustainability, the higher the expectation (i.e., ascription of responsibility) they placed on their team to act environmentally sustainable. McCullough and Trail specifically focused on the respondent's favorite professional team. In this study, we examine the environmental initiatives of a college athletic department. These two contexts are different because a professional sport organization has one team. However, a college athletic department, specifically the one used for this study, sponsors 15 men's and women's teams. Thus, we are examining the perceived fit of the entire athletic department and environmental sustainability and the impact this fit has on receptivity to messaging from the athletic department, and the ascription of responsibility fans place on the athletic department. Based on this theoretical and empirical support, we propose:

Hypothesis 1a. *The Perceived Fit between Athletics and Environmental Sustainability will positively predict Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics.*

Hypothesis 1b. *The Perceived Fit between Athletics and Environmental Sustainability will positively predict Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics.*

2.3. Ascription of Responsibility

Hart [26] introduced the ascription of responsibility to conceptualize the level of responsibility an individual places on a specific entity to address or resolve an issue within their duty to act. This ascription of responsibility has been applied in various social responsibility contexts, specifically environmental sustainability [27]. Dunlap and Van Liere incorporated ascription of responsibility within their environmental paradigm. Stern et al. [28] incorporated ascription of responsibility into their previous work. They noted that the ascription of responsibility individuals placed on governments and corporations to be environmentally sustainable influenced the norms directed towards those entities to resolve environmental sustainability issues (e.g., pollution). Stern [16] later incorporated this into the VBN framework and used contexts to bridge the value-action gap [29]. The ascription of responsibility bridges an individual's beliefs (ascription of responsibility) that a sport organization should be environmentally responsible and influence sustainable behaviors. Casper and colleagues [11] results indicated that the higher ascription of responsibility fans placed on a sport organization to be environmentally friendly, the more likely the fans were to act ecologically responsible themselves, consistent with their environmental beliefs.

Further, McCullough and Trail [9] included ascription of responsibility in the extended SSCEM [6,7] and found that ascription of responsibility to the team significantly predicted sustainable behavioral intentions. However, they discovered that ascription of responsibility to the team does not significantly predict receptivity to messaging from the team. This not significant finding may be explained by the national sample used in this study. They concluded that more research was needed to examine this relationship with a specific sport organization and environmental campaign. Therefore, despite their finding and based on the prior literature, we propose:

Hypothesis 2a. *Ascription of Responsibility will positively predict Sustainability Behaviors.*

Hypothesis 2b. *Ascription of Responsibility will positively impact Receptivity to Messages from Athletics.*

2.4. Attachment to Athletic Department

The concept of points of attachment is based on Stryker and Burke's [29] research involving identity theory. Multiple points of attachment can be leveraged to engage target audiences based on the receptivity of market segments to a particular point of attachment (e.g., sport, league, team, player, coach). The stronger the connection an individual has with a specific point of attachment, the more responsive they are to the overall sport brand's message [30,31]. To this end, McCullough and Trail [15] included points of attachment in the original SSCEM. They sought to differentiate "role identities (identity standards) that are salient relative to the specific event and population" [6] (p. 115). They found that participants' points of attachment to a running event predicted a positive response to the running event's sustainability campaign. Like a participant may be attached to an event's brand, a sport spectator is also connected to an athletic department's brand [32]. The stronger the connection (i.e., point of attachment) an individual has to a sport brand (e.g., athletic department) combined with a high brand-event fit, the increased perception of associated sponsors exists [33]. Within an environmental sustainability context, McCullough and Trail [9] found that the more attached respondents were to their local sports team, the more receptive they were to the team's sustainability. The path coefficient

for this relationship was not large or meaningful; however, it showed a relationship despite their earlier findings [9]. The researchers suggested examining a more specific context to evaluate this relationship. This study examines the ascription of responsibility football fans place on the athletic department because the messages come directly from the athletic department based on its department-wide sustainability campaigns. Based on this recommendation and previous findings, we propose:

Hypothesis 3. *Attachment to Athletics will positively increase Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics.*

2.5. Receptivity to Messaging

Corporate communications, and as a result, marketing, rely on messages being received and interpreted appropriately. Receptivity to these messages is determined by the recipient's increased positive attitudes or behavioral intentions. Within the context of the VBN, communications or marketing can convey the collective identity or norms of a social group (e.g., sport team) to influence environmentally sustainable behaviors. Thus, organizational communications (i.e., marketing) are essential in conveying organizational beliefs and norms to customers. The message type influences customers' receptivity to messaging, resulting in increased environmental and behavioral intentions [34].

Similarly, consumers are more likely to pay more for products with labeling that communicates the product's environmental sustainability attributes [35]. Further, in a sport context, Casper et al. [13] found that the more importance sport fans placed on sport organizations to communicate their environmental efforts, the more likely fans were to engage in environmental sustainability behaviors. McCullough and Trail [9] explored this aspect further. They found a significant relationship between fans' receptivity to messages from the team and their support for environmental initiative sponsors. However, they only found partial support for receptivity to messaging from the team and sustainable behavioral intentions. Their findings stress the importance of such campaigns on fans' receptivity to messaging. Furthermore, their results suggest that the more responsive fans are to messaging, the more likely sport organizations are to fulfilling social (i.e., increased sustainability behaviors) and financial (i.e., support for green corporate partners) returns on investment. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 4a. *Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics will positively increase Support for Environmental Initiative Sponsors.*

Hypothesis 4b. *Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics will positively increase Sustainability Behavior.*

2.6. Sustainability Behaviors

Stern [16] posits that values, beliefs, and norms predict sustainable behaviors. McCullough and Trail [9] used the VBN to ground their extension of the SSCEM to theoretically justify the inclusion of points of attachment (beliefs) and receptivity to messaging (norms) as predictors of sustainable behavioral intentions. They also proposed and found that sustainability behavioral intentions predicted support for sponsors of the environmental initiatives. They based their justification for this hypothesis and its directionality on Speed and Thompson's [35] finding that perceived goodwill associated with a brand engaging in socially beneficial initiatives will transfer to a corporate partner. Consumer behavior research has also found that customers' sustainable behaviors predicted their support for green products and environmental sustainability-oriented companies. Within a sport context, McCullough and Trail [9] found that the more responsive fans were to messaging from the team, the more sport fans intended to act sustainably, and the more likely they were to support 'green' corporate sponsors. However, unlike McCullough and Trail, we examine self-reported sustainability behaviors, but we are examining behavioral

intentions to support the corporate sponsor. Following the rationale and findings above, we propose:

Hypothesis 5. *Sustainability Behavior will positively impact Support for Environmental Initiative Sponsors.*

3. Method

3.1. Context

The client in this study is an Athletic Department located in the United States Midwest region competing in an NCAA Division I, Power 5 conference, which has a long history of environmental sustainability initiatives. The Athletic Department has been recognized for its efforts by trade and national campus sustainability organizations. The Athletic Department recently launched corporate sponsored environmental initiatives and sought information to evaluate these campaigns to report to corporate partners. The corporate partners are both large, publicly traded companies. One sponsor focused on waste management and transportation options in Athletic Department's city. Specifically, the Athletic Department was interested in assessing the campaigns focused on waste diversion (i.e., recycling, composting) and sustainable transportation with an associated corporate partner for each initiative. The sponsored environmental campaigns were communicated to fans via the Athletic Department website, social media, emails to ticketholders, and in-game announcements. These messages had specific calls to action associated with the campaigns (i.e., recycling, composting, and transportation).

3.2. Participants and Procedure

The study protocol was deemed exempt by the human subjects review board. Data were collected using an online survey hosted by Qualtrics. To recruit participants, email invitations were sent out by the client (Athletics Department) to football season ticket holders one week after the final home game of the 2019 season. Participants who completed the survey were offered an incentive to enter a drawing for a \$100 gift certificate. The survey was open for one week, with a follow-up reminder sent by the Athletic Department five days after the initial email. The Athletic Department reported that the email invitation was sent to 6084 individual email accounts. A total of 623 responded to the survey (10.2% response rate), of which 584 had fully complete responses for this study.

The average age of the respondents was 53.33 years old ($SD = 14.28$). They were mostly male ($N = 398, 76.7\%$). Most (85.2%) of the respondents had a household income of over \$75,000 annually, and 62.4% were alums. A total of 84.4% of the respondents attended at least five of the seven possible home football games in the 2019 season. This study's sample population demographics closely matched athletic department internal records of football season ticket holders (i.e., age, sex, alumni status, income).

3.3. Instrumentation

The survey included demographic items (age, sex, income, and affiliation with the university). A summary of all the construct and individual items is provided in Table 1. Attachment to the Athletics Department with a single item was adapted from the Point of Attachment Index's Attachment to the Team subscale and was used previously by others [6,9]. Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics Department was measured with a single item initially adapted from McCullough and Trail [9] to reflect this specific sustainability. We adapted McCullough and Trail's item to reflect the specific sport entity in this study. Ascription of Responsibility to the Athletics Department was measured with a single item. Athletics/Sustainability Fit was measured with a single item, adopted from Speed and Thompson [35], to be specific to environmental sustainability. The single item for Athletics/Sustainability Fit was used previously by McCullough and Trail [9]. Finally, the Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor was measured with a single item adapted from

McCullough and Trail. All items were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Single-item formative measures are common within and outside sport research [36–42]. Similar arguments for the use of single items in sustainability research were also made by Trail and McCullough [6]. Single items were used due to the limitations placed on the questionnaire by the client (i.e., athletic department) in this data collection.

Table 1. Construct, Item, Mean, Standard Deviation (S.D.), and Loading.

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Std. Loading</i>
Athletics/Sustainability Fit	There is a logical fit between ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT and environmental sustainability	5.274	1.529	
Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics	Sports teams should encourage their community to act sustainably	5.681	1.327	
<i>Attachment to Athletics</i>	I think that the team should act in an environmentally friendly way as much as possible	5.898	1.086	
Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics	I think the team should actively encourage their fans to be as environmentally friendly as possible	4.657	1.710	
Sustainability Behavior		45.947	28.064	
	Approximately what percentage of the time do you engage in the following activities at FOOTBALL GAMES: Recycle	72.403	37.385	0.860
	Approximately what percentage of the time do you engage in the following activities at FOOTBALL GAMES: Compost	42.760	43.494	0.843
	Approximately what percentage of the time do you engage in the following activities at FOOTBALL GAMES: Use Environmentally Friendly Transportation	22.678	33.678	0.558
Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor	I am more likely to purchase products from corporations that support environmental sustainability initiatives.	5.118	1.475	

Three items assessed participants' Sustainability Behavior at football games. The three items were averaged to create a single-item construct and have acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.71$). The construct reliability was 0.805, which exceeded the suggested level of 0.70 [43]. The three behaviors (i.e., recycling, composting, and using environmentally friendly transportation) were selected because the client (i.e., Athletic Department) specifically requested that these behaviors be examined. Each behavior was on a sliding scale from 0–100%. In addition, these behaviors were available at the games (recycle & compost bins, bike valet). After all, these behaviors are the focus of the Athletic Department sustainability campaigns supported by corporate partners. Overall, single items were used due to the limitations placed on the questionnaire by the client (i.e., athletic department) in this data collection.

3.4. Data Analysis

We analyzed the data with IBM SPSS Statistics 26. Each item was reviewed for face validity by athletics department staff and sustainability experts. Initial analysis included descriptive analyses of demographic variables to assess the representativeness of the desired participant group of football season ticketholders. These descriptive statistics were compared to demographic season ticketholder data provided by the Athletic Department. Items used in the model were reported descriptively (Mean and SD) and examined for

normality (i.e., skewness and kurtosis) by applying critical values of less than ± 2.0 for skewness and less than ± 3.0 for kurtosis [44]. However, internal consistency (i.e., reliability) for the single items could not be assessed because we did not analyze multiple item scales [41,42].

A structural equation modeling (SEM) path analysis using AMOS 27 was performed to examine hypotheses specific to the model. The following fit indices were used: Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Fit Index (TLI), Goodness of Fit (GIF), Relative Fit Index (RFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). According to Hu and Bentler [45], fit index values of CFI, TLI, and RFI above 0.90 and RMSEA values less than 0.05 are considered acceptable. Hypotheses were confirmed/disconfirmed based on the strength of the relationships (the paths) and significance ($p < 0.05$).

4. Results

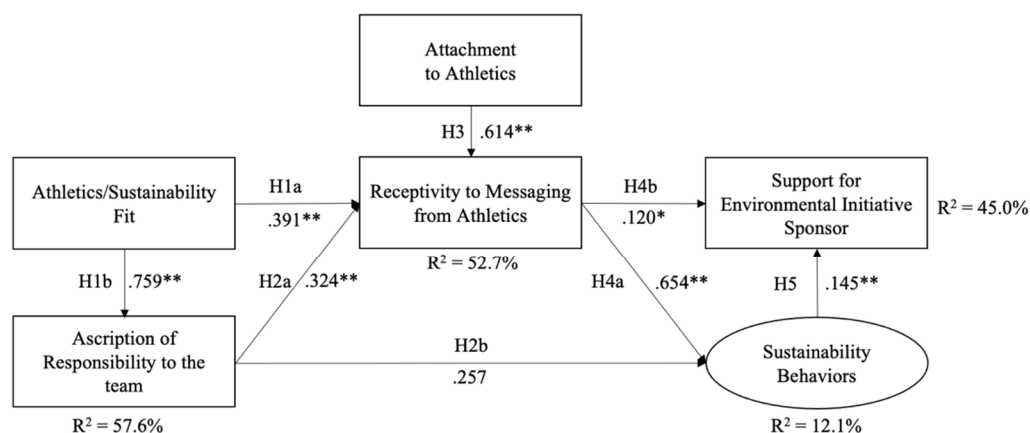
Before performing the SEM path analysis, a descriptive analysis, including factor loadings of the behavioral construct (Table 1), was examined. Further, the univariate normality of all model variables was examined based on skewness, kurtosis values, and correlations between model variables (Table 2). All normality indicators were in an appropriate range revealing a mesokurtic distribution of the data and a normal distribution.

Table 2. Correlations and Normality Measures (N = 548).

Model Item	Attachment to Athletics	Athletics/Sustainability Fit	Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics	Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics	Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor	Sustainability Behavior	Skewness Statistic	Kurtosis Statistic
Attachment to Athletics	1.0	0.219 *	0.308 *	0.162 *	0.209 *	0.308 *	-1.316	2.593
Athletics/Sustainability Fit		1.0	0.674 *	0.759 *	0.689 *	0.674 *	-1.040	0.729
Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics			1.0	0.647 *	0.654 *	0.674 *	-0.550	-0.416
Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics				1.0	0.760 *	0.675 *	-1.414	2.097
Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor					1.0	0.654 *	-0.866	0.554
Sustainability Behavior						1.0	-0.076	-1.001

Note. * Indicates $p < 0.05$.

Path analysis results examining the model's hypothesized paths are shown in Table 3 and graphically depicted in Figure 2. Overall, the model showed good fit based on CFI and TLI, and marginal fit for RMSEA (Chi-Square = 238.301, $df = 6$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.982, TLI = 0.925, RFI = 0.912, GIF = 0.980, RMSEA = 0.098). While values for chi-square and RMSEA were high, CFI and TLI were acceptable [46]. Due to low degrees of freedom, no modifications to the model were made. The model's results found that all hypothesized paths in the model were significant. Specifically, we found that Athletics Department/Sustainability Fit explained 57.6% of the variance for Ascription of Responsibility to the Athletics Department. We also found that Athletics Department/Sustainability Fit explained 52.7% of the variance of receptivity to messaging, ascription of responsibility to the athletics department, and attachment to the athletics department. Further, ascription of responsibility to the athletics department and receptivity to messaging from the athletics department explained 12.1% of the variance of sustainability behaviors. Finally, 45.0% of the variance explaining support of environmental initiative sponsor was explained by receptivity to messaging from the athletics department and sustainability behaviors.



Note. * indicates $p < .05$; ** indicates $p < .001$

Figure 2. Results of the structural equation model include standardized β -weights, p-values, and R² values.

Table 3. Structural Model Analysis examining Hypothesized Paths.

	Structural Path	Standardized Estimate (B)	Critical Ratio (t-Value)	p	R ²
H1a	Athletics/Sustainability Fit → Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics	0.391	8.38	<0.001	
H2a	Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics → Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics	0.324	7.036	<0.001	0.527
H3	Attachment to Athletics → Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics	0.614	18.272	<0.001	
H1b	Athletics/Sustainability Fit → Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics	0.759	26.77	<0.001	0.576
H4a	Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics → Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor	0.654	19.862	<0.001	0.450
H5	Sustainability Behaviors → Support of Environmental Initiative Sponsor	0.145	4.305	<0.001	
H2b	Ascription of Responsibility to Athletics → Sustainability Behaviors	0.257	4.783	<0.001	0.121
H4b	Receptivity to Messaging from Athletics → Sustainability Behaviors	0.120	2.246	0.025	

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to further examine the applicability of McCullough and Trail’s [9] extension of the SSCEM [6] by examining the experience fans had with a specific sport organization’s sponsored environmental initiative. McCullough and Trail proposed to expand the SSCEM using VBN [16] as a theoretical foundation to examine the key performance indicators of an athletic department’s sustainability campaign by looking at the fit of a point of attachment (i.e., athletics department), sustainability-point of attachment fit, and receptivity to messaging and their influence on KPIs as defined by the athletic department (i.e., support of the athletics department and corporate sponsor) as shown in Figure 2.

Specifically, we found that the perceived fit between the athletics department and environmental sustainability significantly predicted ascription of responsibility to the athletics department and receptivity to messaging from the athletics department—supporting Hypotheses 1. Our findings support previous research by Becker-Olsen et al. [23], who found that sport fans will be more receptive to marketing messages when they perceive a strong fit between a sport brand and a corporate partner. Our data and results support

that the athletic department has a strong fit with environmental sustainability efforts. Those fans more readily respond to messaging from the athletics department when they perceive a strong fit. This is to say that fans see the athletic department as a legitimate messenger to promote its environmental sustainability values and initiatives. This finding is consistent with Inoue and Kent's [5] finding and the United Nations Sports for Climate Action Framework's suggestion that sport organizations can effectively deliver messages to promote environmental sustainability to fans. Our results further support the need for sport organizations to carefully consider which environmental sustainability initiatives to highlight. Target audiences may not be receptive to all environmental sustainability initiatives. It would behoove sport organizations and sponsors to assess their target markets' feelings and potential responses before deploying their marketing campaigns.

We also found that the athletics department's sustainability fit explained a large percentage of the ascription of responsibility that fans placed on the athletic department to be environmentally responsible. Previous researchers have found that the more customers perceive fit with environmental sustainability and a brand, the more customers expect that brand to be environmentally accountable [24,25]. Our results further support McCullough and Trail's [9] finding that team-sustainability fit predicts the ascription of responsibility fans place on teams to be environmentally responsible. Our explained variance of this relationship (57.6%) is consistent with McCullough and Trail's national sample population. They found that fit explained 61.1% of ascription of responsibility. This consistent finding encourages the inclusion of these aspects in further research exploring sport-oriented sustainability marketing campaigns. This is a critical aspect for sport organizations to consider as generational differences become more salient among sport fans. That is, sport organizations may need to consider ways to attract younger generations of fans (e.g., GenZ) who value corporate brands more to be values-driven and evaluate their environmental impacts [47].

Consistent with prior research, we found that attachment to the athletic department would increase receptivity to messaging—supporting Hypothesis 3. These findings are consistent with the influence that points of attachment have in sport consumer research [48]. Trail and McCullough [6,7] suggest that multiple points of attachment (i.e., community, event, sport organization) can be leveraged to promote environmental messages that resonate with fans. In addition, McCullough and Trail [9] found that sport fans would be responsive to their team's sustainability messages, building on Inoue and Kent's [5] earlier findings. This study builds upon those empirical foundations by supporting that an athletic department is a compelling point of attachment for sport fans to resonate (i.e., respond) to sustainability messaging.

It is interesting to note that the sample was collected from football season ticket holders. However, the campaign messages were from the broader athletic department, not the football program. Thus, our findings suggest that environmental sustainability messages can orient from the athletic department rather than exclusively from the football team. This finding is important to consider, understanding the point of attachment that can be leveraged to resonate with fans. In this instance, the athletics department may use the same messages across other sports to resonate with fans of any sport. However, more research is necessary to explore if messages at football games are received and acted upon in the same way or result in similar responses from fans across other sports (i.e., male vs. female, winter vs. spring, indoor vs. outdoor sports). Further, the receptivity to messaging should also be explored among a single sport organization (e.g., participant event, professional team). In addition, looking at digital and social delivery of messages and only in-person sustainability messaging is an area to explore further to drive broader attention across the marketing mix of sport organizations.

We found the ascription of responsibility to the athletics department and responses to messaging from the athletics department explained 12.1% of the explained sustainability behaviors of the participants. The standardized estimates for ascription of responsibility and receptivity to messaging from athletics were significant, supporting Hypotheses

H2a and H4b. This finding is consistent with Casper et al.'s [11] earlier work that found that ascription of responsibility predicted behavioral intentions. McCullough and Trail [9] also found support for receptivity to messaging from a team in predicting sustainable behavioral intentions. It should be noted that the relationship is significant ($p = 0.025$), but the standardized estimate was below 0.3, suggesting the relationship was not meaningful [49]. This finding is not consistent with the theoretical foundations of Stryker and Burke [29]. They suggested that individuals modify their behaviors based on assumed behavioral norms as part of their collective identity. The specific campaign messaging may explain this significant but not meaningful finding. This stresses the importance of crafting campaign messaging to align with campaign-relevant environmental behaviors, like taking mass transit, composting, recycling, or purchasing carbon offsets, among other examples. One explanation may be that lower-identified fans are more responsive to environmental messaging and are more likely to increase their perceived value of the sport brand [13]. The same may be true in this study, given the sample's attachment to the Athletic Department ($M = 5.898$, $SD = 1.086$) and their support of environmental initiative corporate partners.

This gap in values (stated receptivity to messaging) and action (sustainability behaviors) has been noted [29]. Blake suggested that individuals may have environmental values but do not act upon those values because of external or internal constraints [30]. In the complete SSCM, Trail and McCullough [6,7] incorporated internal and external constraints to explain behavioral intentions. They suggested that external constraints or physical or environmental barriers can prevent individuals from engaging in sustainable behaviors—a finding consistent with Trail and McCullough [11]. Specifically, they found that external constraints must be dealt with first before addressing internal constraints through marketing campaigns. Internal constraints influence the beliefs, values, and worth of engaging in environmental sustainability initiatives. This cost-benefit analysis can improve the perceived cost (i.e., overcoming external constraints) to achieve the benefits (i.e., perceived worth, value, beliefs) of engaging in a specific environmental sustainability behavior.

Despite the lack of meaningful results for sustainable behaviors focused on the athletics department, we found that 45.0% of the variance of support for environmental initiatives through sponsors was explained by receptivity to messaging from the athletics department and sustainability behaviors. However, the standardized estimate for sustainability behaviors was below 0.3, suggesting a significant yet not meaningful relationship—partially supporting Hypothesis 5. Our finding is inconsistent with previous research outside of sport that found that the more people behaved in sustainable ways, the more they supported environmentally sustainable brands [34]. Further, McCullough and Trail [9] found that their sustainable behavioral intentions predicted their support for green corporate sponsors among a national sample of sport fans. Thus, our findings suggest that there may be a poor fit between the environmental initiative and the selected corporate green sponsor. Another explanation may be a different example of the value action gap [29]. However, in this instance, a sport fan may be shifting from their collective identity (i.e., athletic department social identity) to another salient identity when considering supporting the green corporate sponsor outside of the sport context.

However, receptivity to messaging from the athletic department was significant and meaningful—supporting Hypotheses 4a, further stressing the importance of sports organizations communicating their environmental sustainability efforts to fans. This finding is consistent with McCullough and Trail [9], who found that the more responsive sport fans were to messaging from their team, the more likely they were to support the corporate green sponsor. Our finding in this study stresses the importance of considering the direct relationship between the campaign message over sustainable behaviors. That is, sport practitioners are now seeking ways to financially support their environmental initiatives through sponsorships as the new wave of environmental sustainability in sport [2]. However, many sport organizations do not communicate their environmental sustainability

initiatives [2] because they are unsure how their fans will respond. Our findings suggest that sport organizations are effective messengers for environmental sustainability initiatives and reap the financial benefits of being environmentally sustainable. This benefit comes through communications and marketing their sustainability initiatives.

5.1. Managerial Implications

There are several implications for practitioners and researchers based on our findings. The first important aspect is that sport practitioners should consider the fit between their chosen environmental sustainability initiatives with their brand. Sport practitioners would benefit from assessing the perceived fit of specific environmental initiatives and their sport organization before launching specific campaigns. This aspect is vital to decipher as more sport organizations engage in environmental sustainability initiatives, and sport practitioners should understand the best fit for their organization to minimize the potential of mimetic isomorphism of environmental initiatives rather than be in a rush to launch initiatives. In addition, this strategic approach can determine appropriate fits that register with the organization's fan base or market segments.

Second, our findings confirm that fans' beliefs (i.e., ascription of responsibility) strongly predict receptivity to messaging and resulting sustainable behaviors and intentions to support corporate partners. Thus, sport organizations would benefit from understanding their fans' expectations and beliefs about environmental sustainability as they design their sustainability strategy. Understanding these expectations may indicate that market segments within their fan base are more receptive to campaigns and corporate partners. This understanding can allow sport practitioners to be more effective in targeting specific audiences that will be responsive and engage in the specific calls to action. These captive segments will also provide richer data to attract corporate sponsors to engage sport fans concerning environmental sustainability issues and initiatives.

Third, our findings suggest that sport organizations must promote their environmental sustainability efforts to reap fulfilling social and economic KPIs. Previous researchers have noted increased revenue streams as possible outcomes and motivations for sport organizations to engage in environmental sustainability initiatives [20]. Our data suggest that sport organizations that invest long-term in their environmental initiatives, stay committed, and communicate their initiatives to their fans, will have sustained success. This commitment makes it easier for fans to be receptive to messaging as they expect it over time. This leads to the question whether the perceived authenticity of the sport organization's environmental efforts. For example, fans may be more receptive to messaging because there is a history of the athletic department engaging in such activities than an organization just starting its publicity of environmental sustainability. This expectation becomes the norms of the organization and the group's social identity (i.e., fans). The more receptive fans are to these messages—implying they are aware of these initiatives—the more likely they will support environmental initiative sponsors.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the strengths of this study and its implications, there are limitations. First, the client (i.e., the athletics department) limited the number of items to assess their environmental efforts. This aspect limited us to examining the sample's (i.e., football season ticket holders) connection with the football team. As a result, we could not assess other points of attachment (e.g., athletic department, university, players, coaches). Future researchers should explore this extension of the SSCEM in various contexts [10]. Specific to this study, it would be valuable for researchers to examine whether fans of various teams across the athletic department have similar responses to environmental campaigns and messages. In addition, researchers should examine the influence of fans' specific affiliation with the sport property in communicating the environmental initiatives. Researchers could also explore the varying impacts of different points of attachment as they relate to

receptivity to messaging and support for corporate partners. This examination can leverage points of attachment to expand the reach of corporate-sponsored initiatives.

Second, we do not have a baseline for receptivity to messages from Athletics. In this instance, we have a snapshot of fans' receptivity and cannot track how responses change longitudinally as the department's environmental efforts progress. Researchers should explore sport organizations at various stages of their environmental sustainability efforts. As fans become more aware and interact with these initiatives, their expectations may arise, and these environmental values may become part of the organization or social culture. To this end, some fans may not understand the connection between sport and the natural environment and, as a result, may be confused about why a sport organization may be promoting environmental sustainability initiatives. This lack of awareness or understanding influences ascription of responsibility [11,13] and could subsequently impact receptivity to messaging and support of environmental initiative sponsors. Thus, researchers should explore the boundaries of this extension of the SSCEM and if the maturity of the sport organization's environmental efforts influences perceptions of fit, ascription of responsibility, and receptivity to messaging.

Third, we were limited by the number of items on the survey. As a result, some variables were assessed using single-item measures (e.g., receptivity to messaging, fit). Using single items has been supported in other marketing and sport marketing literature. These studies suggest that the use of single items is statistically supported and practically useful due to the limitations of the applied nature and reliance on coordinating with a business when surveying customers or, in a sport context, fans/spectators [39–42]

Fourth, we asked respondents about their self-reported behaviors (i.e., recycling, composting, using environmentally friendly transportation) and their behavioral intentions to support corporate partners. Some concerns are that self-reported sustainability behaviors may be inflated [49,50]. Similarly, behavioral intentions also have limitations, but behavioral intentions are commonly used in social- and behavioral science and are the best predictors for actual behaviors [51,52]. Future research should explore ways to independently collect behavioral data of sport spectators related to environmental behaviors and the support of corporate partners related to sustainability campaigns. While this process is complex and sometimes cost-prohibitive, this would serve as the logical progression in this line of inquiry. Due to the limitations of attaining such data, this would be a significant leap forward to understanding the key performance indicators of environmental sustainability initiatives in a sport context.

6. Conclusions

The sport sector and individual sport organizations are advancing their environmental sustainability initiatives, and these initiatives are more sophisticated. As a result, new trends emerge where sport organizations seek and leverage new or existing sponsors to finance environmental sustainability initiatives [9]; as governing bodies suggest [53], sport organizations must be seen as legitimate in their intentions and environmental sustainability achievements. Once this perception is accomplished, sport organizations can begin communicating and educating their fans to follow suit. These combined aspects of engaging in environmental sustainability and promoting those initiatives to fans will attract corporate partners. Our findings here indicate that the ascription of responsibility placed on the athletic department predicts their receptivity to environmental messages and, consequently, their support of the sponsors of environmental initiatives. This is a positive finding for sport organizations engaged in environmental sustainability initiatives but is hesitant to communicate them to fans due to potential fan reactions. Our data is encouraging to show that attachment to the athletics department is significant and meaningful in predicting receptivity to the sport brand's messaging. That is, sport practitioners should be confident that fans will be receptive to sustainability messages from the brand because of the connection their fans have to the sport brand. However, sport organizations cannot rely on the relationship with their fans alone to ensure the success of their environmental

sustainability marketing campaigns. Practitioners should consider the fit between their organizations, a potential corporate partner, and the selected ecological initiative and the level of ascription of responsibility their fans place on the organization to engage in that respective environmental initiative as other influences on their fans' responses to messaging among other variables (e.g., values, external or external constraints) outlined in the SSCEM [7].

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