

Introduction to the Special Issue

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This new Special Issue, entirely dedicated to football, is as timely and interesting as ever. The hope is that it can spark a debate for finding new solutions and renewed business and management models for a sustainable, ethical and impactful football that supports the development of the context and society.

Other papers dedicated to this theme will be published in the next issue, and others have constituted a sort of prologue to the Special, having been published in the issue preceding this one. Ultimately, the Special Issue on the football industry consists of 15 articles: 3 published in No. 2/2023; 6 in this issue, and another 6 in No. 2/2024.

In this issue, contributions on economic sustainability in the football industry have been selected.

The first paper, by Rita Mura, Francesca Vicentini, Daniele Canini, and Giambattista Rossi, titled “*Are Italian Football Clubs embracing Sustainability?*”, is a systematic analysis concerning the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives implemented by Italian Serie A football clubs, conducted through interviews with Club executives. The authors adopt Stakeholder Theory to analyze the relationship between the sport organizations and their main socio-economic interlocutors. The paper identifies specific

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areas of interest for CSR activities and a significant commitment of the Clubs in relation to human resources (internal) and financial stability. The theoretical implications of the results are linked to the development of knowledge on the specific organizational characteristics of the strategies implemented by the clubs, namely the scope of activities and the implementation of ad hoc foundations.

In the second paper, by Nicola Davola, Francesca Vicentini, and Rita Mura (*“Is gender a sustainability balance driver in football?”*), the results of an empirical survey conducted on a sample of non-professional football players (both male and female) are presented. The purpose is to highlight how the differences between men’s and women’s football (not only in terms of physical attributes and technical performances but also about economic and marketing aspects) can contribute to building a “new model” of CSR in football, encouraging clubs to broaden and enhance their CSR goals.

In the paper by Marco Francesco Mazzù, Federica Savarese, Pantaleo Cisotta, Elisabetta Scognamiglio, and Irene Litardi (*“The interplay between reputation, sustainability, and impact: an impact-driven framework for sport teams”*), sustainability initiatives related to supporting a football team’s brand are analyzed in terms of positive economic-social and reputational effects (impact management). Specifically, clubs from the top five European football leagues were investigated, and the positive effect of sustainability practices in developing corporate reputation, as perceived by the main stakeholders, was noted.

Equally interesting is the study by Giorgia Profumo, Rongtitya Rith, Riccardo Spinelli, and Ginevra Testa (*“Corporate Social Responsibility Communication in the Football Industry: Evidence from Juventus Football Club”*), which examines the communication and reporting policies of social responsibility of professional football companies. Using the case study methodology, the paper analyzes the case of Juventus and the different appreciation of its users and supporters with respect to the variety of communication channels and contents. It is interesting to note how the results obtained show that effective communication on CSR, especially by mobilizing social media more frequently, can help clubs build solid relationships with stakeholders, as well as improve their identity and reputation.

Carmen Gallucci and Riccardo Tipaldi, in their paper titled *“Governance, Management, Sustainability, and Performance in the Football Industry: A Bibliometric Analysis”*, present an exhaustive bibliometric analysis of the most recent studies on sustainability, governance, management, and performance in the football industry. The results highlight how environmental and/or social responsibility of football clubs is no longer a mere statement of intents but it is starting to become a form of promise to all stakeholders. This

study integrates existing academic research on the governance, management, sustainability, and performance of football clubs, presenting a bibliometric analysis using the R bibliometrix package and the WoS database. The survey detects the emergence of four relevant themes: Football club governance and performance; The nexus between football performance and financial markets; The impact of csr strategies on football club performance; Promoting quantitative research methods in football studies.

Finally, “*Sustainability of Debt in the Football Industry: One, Nobody, and One Hundred Thousand Owners*” concludes this first volume of the Special Issue. The work of Stefania Zanda, Pasqualina Porretta, Fabrizio Santoboni, and Francesca Cataldo analyzes the financial and economic results of Italian football clubs and their prospects, also in relation to the competitors of European football clubs. The study is such that it can constitute the conceptual basis for future theoretical and/or empirical research. Of particular interest, for example, is the analysis of the relationship between risk and uncertainty, which plays a decisive role for a football company, as the dynamics of sporting results often appear volatile and cannot be measured through a probability distribution; at the same time, sporting results influence economic performance and the related sustainability of debt.

In the conclusions, the Authors argue that the radical “economic rationalization” of football could profoundly change the sports culture, characterized by the uncertainty caused by competition among peers and by the logic of identity that links a national team or a club to a territory. All of these are defining elements at the base of many sociological and anthropological analyses by football historians.