

INTERROGATING THE SUSTAINABILITY CONCEPT IN THE F1 TEAMS' SPONSORSHIP PRACTICES

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Abstract

The intersection of sustainability and sports has emerged as a pivotal arena for exploring the evolving dynamics of contemporary society. In the context of Formula 1, sustainability-related norms and policies have started to affect sponsorship relations. The study aims to examine how F1 teams' sustainability strategies have impacted their sponsorship policies. To get a better understanding of views, motives and activities related to the adaptation of the sustainability concept to their sponsorship propositions, semi-structured interviews with commercial managers from three F1 teams were conducted. Facing diverse stakeholder pressures and expectations, as well as the newly adopted internal policies, the teams' commercial departments have embraced sustainable development for strategic and instrumental reasons. The adjustments concentrate on aligning the teams' sponsorship practices with their management vision and sustainability prioritisation. Simultaneously, they also aim to support the implementation of the teams' sustainability commitments. However, the data suggests that sustainability is not yet consistently a decisive factor in F1 sponsorships. That sparks ethical dilemmas, as teams continue partnering with sponsors from contradictive industries, highlighting a paradox between the sport's dedication to sustainability and its reliance on commercial ventures. The paper unpacks the under-researched relationship between the adoption of sustainability norms and policies and their practical manifestations in organisational sponsorships.

Keywords: Formula 1, sustainability, sponsorships, brands, practices

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Introduction

In the last 20 years, at least, the notion of sustainability has been steadily promoted by influential political actors and occupied a central place on the international agenda including the business community. Increasingly, visions of sport development and related strategies and policies are shaped by the idea of sustainable development and Formula 1 (F1) does not make an exception. As a global sport with a cumulative TV audience of 1.9 billion people, 500 million followers and a global presence in 24 different countries, F1 is one of the most

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powerful sporting platforms in the world. The global popularity, interest in and importance of F1 as an industry, closely integrated with other economic sectors, raises the question of its role in sustainable development. This is because at the core of sustainable development is the expressed concern to meet the needs of diverse communities, while at the same time ensuring that social and economic benefits are distributed fairly in society (Dresner, 2003). According to Boron & Murray (2004), sustainability represents a paradigm shift in reformatting the balance between the three main domains of policy development – economic, social and environmental. This conjecture brings an entirely new dimension to the F1's sporting and commercial activities, thus turning it into a management issue. It should be noted that this topic is closely intertwined with the F1 teams' goals, strategies, policies, marketing, management and effects of competitions.

The study aims to examine how Formula 1, and more specifically three teams within Formula 1, have restructured their sponsorships to adapt to the sustainability discourse. For that purpose, the paper attempts to answer the following key research questions:

1. What is the F1 teams' sustainability vision and how it is operationalised in corporate strategies, policies and sponsorship-related organisational practices?
2. How is the idea of sustainable development viewed by F1 commercial partnership managers?
3. Why do they adopt it, that is, what makes sustainable development valuable to F1 sponsorship operations?

The influx of the sustainability idea and its adoption in Formula 1

As with similar bold ideas, the notion of sustainable development evolved over time. Therefore, it is important to understand how the concept came about and how it assumed the central play that has been afforded to it. To that end, the notion of 'framing' provides a useful conceptual means to answer those questions. Boas & McNeill (2004, p. 1) proposed a two-step guide for understanding the exercise of framing where it is interpreted as including first, how attention was drawn to an issue, and second, determining how this idea was viewed and adopted in the F1 domain. In other words, how powerful international organisations influence both thought and action in the field.

As far as can be ascertained, it is hardly possible to determine the origin of the term 'sustainable development', but it was undoubtedly the Brundtland Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987 that brought both the issue of the environment, and more specifically the idea of sustainable development into the social and political agenda. The WCED defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present

without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED, 1987). Since then, sustainable development has become a very contested term as it still lacks analytical rigor, reliable conceptualisation and practical operationalisation. Furthermore, it is marked by being particularly malleable and open to wide interpretations by conveying different meanings to different stakeholders. Despite its conflicting interpretations, sustainable development has evolved over the past two decades from a mere action plan into a normative concept. It now advocates institutionalized behavior and holds the potential to deliver significant impacts to a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

The contribution that sports can make in delivering Millennium Goals was acknowledged by the UN in 2017, marking a milestone, as the organization recognized sports as a key driver for promoting sustainable practices, subsequently integrating it into the Sustainable Development Goals. Recently, climate change, as one of the dimensions of sustainable development, has also come into the political spotlight. Building on the outcomes of the 2021 Glasgow Climate Summit, nearly 300 international and national sports organisations (including the FIA) have signed up for the UN Framework for Climate Action in Sport, pledging their commitment to these goals and the pursuit of sustainable development. The document requires organisations to commit to specific climate goals, plan, demonstrate action and report on what they have done. This step represents an important strategic change in the policy and activities of the FIA, F1 and all 10 participating teams with long-term managerial, political, social and economic implications. The internal management changes can be partially explained with the emerging idea of 'conscious capitalism' or the creation of long-term benefits and sustainable development for multiple stakeholders (Duffy et al., 2020). In this regard, it is also necessary to consider the concept of the 'Triple Bottom Line' (TBL) which is concerned with the combination of the core dimensions of sustainable development; that is, economic, social, and environmental (Elkington, 1997). The logic behind the TBL concept is that without considering these three aspects, no product, business or material will be successful in the long run. The TBL goal is to align the company's financial interests with the interests of external stakeholders (Savitz & Weber, 2006).

Hence, the challenge for the F1 sustainability image arises from the imbalance among the economic, social, and environmental aspects within its competitions. Often, researchers tend to analyse only one of these primary factors, overlooking the other two pillars of the triple baseline. Smith & Westerbeek (2004) found that sport poses a threat to the environment and Dingle (2007) concluded that sport is mainly dependent on the consumption of non-renewable resources such as electricity, oil and plastic. Hence the great criticism of Formula 1, perceived as one of the leading sports that harm the environment, generates 256,551 tons of carbon

footprint (F1 Sustainability Strategy, 2019). Outside of the race performances, F1 is regarded by some as a ‘global motorsport circus’, traveling to 24 countries each year, transporting a large amount of equipment, people and fans. From an environmental point of view, the sport has been criticized for ‘greenwashing’ and hypocrisy (Næss, 2020). Furthermore, the sport faced criticism for potential sports-washing, particularly following the F1 management’s \$500 million deal with Qatar and Saudi Arabia (McEvoy, 2020), as both countries face significant concerns regarding human rights and gender equality. On the other hand, Green (2001) suggests that sporting events are no longer simply about providing good sport, but are valuable catalysts for economic development. Sporting events have the potential to not just drive economic development but also serve as a trigger for instigating changes in regional social and environmental initiatives. F1 is an attractive tool for various host countries to stimulate economic benefits, such as: increasing tourism, stimulating the national economy, strengthening and developing regional business relationships, and promoting the country. As an example, in 2022, the F1 race in Zandvoort created an added economic value of €32.2 million for the Dutch economy, creating more than 600 new jobs for the local population (Formula1.com, 2022a).

All of these aspects present the complexity of Formula 1 and challenge the status quo that sustainability should be analysed only through the lens of organising environmentally sustainable events. As already discussed, sustainability is a much more nuanced concept. It involves both external influences and corresponding internal changes in management philosophies, systems, policies, corporate/brand visions and strategies. All of these topics require careful planning, execution, and strategic resource mobilisation.

The sustainability approach and complexity have impacted the relationship between sponsors and sponsees in F1. Traditionally, viewed through the lens of marketing and strategic alliance literature, sports sponsorship is a collaborative agreement that aims at achieving promotional objectives for one or both parties through the exchange of strategic material and non-material resources. Integral to these collaborations is a minimum partnership agreement of three years, within which both teams and partners exchange and integrate various resources, which is a requisite for the attainment of shared partnership objectives. The spectrum of resource exchanges encompasses diverse forms and interactions. In the case of sponsorship in Formula 1, the sponsoring company provides financial means, or goods and services (in-kind), aiming to support the team’s performance and development. In return, the team provides certain tangible and intangible assets (e.g., intellectual property rights, image/video team usage, branding, hospitality, access to drivers and team management, partners’ introductions,

show cars, merchandising items, R&D programmes, etc.). These are utilised by the sponsoring company to gain a commercial or performance advantage.

However, modern sports sponsorship has become even more complex. Under the big social and governance political movements and beliefs, the focus has shifted from mere substantial investments targeting a vast international sports audience for quick profits to purpose-driven sports partnerships in which both partnering parties appear as political actors, taking a stand on social issues and showing a certain attitude. Business marketing leaders understand that their sports sponsorships should be authentic and with a higher purpose than just financial benefits. The concept of purpose-driven partnerships finds support in a study conducted by MKTG Frontiers (2020). Their findings reveal compelling advantages: 95% of respondents believe that meaningful brand actions via sponsorship foster customer loyalty; 90% see sponsorship as a significant way to connect with customers; and 81% agree that demonstrating shared values can portray brands as enriching customers' lives. In this regard, brands are inclined towards forging partnerships exclusively with sports entities that authentically align with congruent sustainability norms and values. They have been increasingly seeking to leverage long-term partnerships that enable delivering enduring value, including accessing and engaging target audiences over time.

Influenced by that commercial philosophy, the F1 teams should be very quick to adapt to the global economic situation and social interests. The F1 commercial partnership managers face the ongoing challenge of maintaining a delicate equilibrium: seeking new financial avenues for their teams while keeping their teams' sustainability commitments. This balance is fragile, exacerbated by certain F1 sponsorships that prompt ethical concerns. Many sponsors come from controversial industries like tobacco, alcohol, gambling, and oil, creating a paradox between the sport's sustainability pledge and its commercial orientation (Andrews et al., 2023).

Methodology

The posed three research questions drive the applied methodological approach related to revealing the impact of sustainability strategies on Formula 1 team sponsorship processes and partnership structure. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select three F1 teams. Each of the selected teams was classified as a high, middle, and bottom-ranked performance team, respectively, based on the 2022 constructor standing (Formula1.com, 2022b). Hence, the studied teams included Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 Team (ranked 3rd), BTW Alpine F1 Team (ranked 4th), and Williams Racing (ranked 10th). Within their organisations, by developing new revenue streams, the commercial department plays a pivotal role in ensuring the team's competitiveness and sustaining its operations. For that

reason, executives from each team's commercial department were interviewed through the method of semi-structured interviews. It should be underlined that commercial partnership managers are primarily responsible for examining the market and building a market strategy; identifying new commercial partners for the team within different sectors on a global scale; establishing a dialogue with them; and selling the team's brand and marketing assets. In pursuit of these objectives, the commercial partnership managers engage in close collaboration with the team's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and other internal departments and units, as well as external experts, especially when considering certain technical matters. It is worth noting that, in cases where a new sponsorship activation concept related to sustainability initiatives is concerned, commercial partnership managers collaborate with the team's sustainability director. This collaboration distinctly elucidates the implicit or explicit relations between sponsorship practices and sustainability policies, demonstrating their integration at every organisational level in practical terms.

Before conducting the interviews, each interviewee was preliminarily contacted and provided with information about the study's purpose and their consent was obtained before it. A comprehensive interview guide was developed, covering the themes identified in the research questions. The interviews lasted between 40 to 45 minutes, allowing for in-depth discussions around the main themes as well as other important topics that further emerged. All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate capture of responses and to facilitate subsequent transcription and analysis. The interviews took place online between January 2023 and July 2023. Later, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, ensuring that all responses were accurately captured. The identities of the interviewees were kept confidential, ensuring the security and confidentiality of both audio recordings and transcripts.

Results and discussion

To reflect the expectations of its various stakeholders over time, in 2019 the company Formula 1 Limited announced its first sustainability strategy, aiming to become a carbon-neutral sport by 2030, was leaving a positive ecological footprint in hosting countries. (F1 Sustainability Strategy, 2019). Moreover, F1 became the first motorsport championship in the world in which teams were accredited with the highest level of environmental sustainability recognition (FIA 3 Star Accreditation, 2011). All the three teams under scrutiny have subsequently developed sustainability strategies, focusing their own commitment predominantly on environmental and social aspects of sustainable development (Table 1).

Continued

1	2022	2030	4 To become carbon neutral team.	5 1.Environmental 2.Governance 3.Social	6 1.1 Development and use of 100% sustainable fuel 1.2 Development of aviation sustainable fuel 1.3 Factory and management sites – use of 100% renewable energy 1.4 Carbon credit programmes – reliable biological and revolutionary technical carbon capture 2.1 Equality, diversity and inclusion – 25% of all new hires to come from underrepresented groups (minorities) by the end of 2025; 3.1 Creation of a DE&I Forum of 25 volunteer teams from underrepresented groups (minorities). Likewise, initiatives such as: Pride Month, NWED Film Night, Lunch & Learn sessions on Menopause Awareness, British Sign Language, Ethics of Ethnic Diversity, Building Confidence at Work and Neurodiversity, Held a Girls on Track UK STEM day, International Women in Engineering Day, Accelerate Inclusion workshops. 2.2 Charity and local community – initiatives such as: Riding for Research, Wingwalking, Run Silverstone, Alzheimer's Research UK, Donated to the Brackley Youth Engagement group, etc.	7 To become the most sustainable sport team in the world.
Mercedes AMG Petronas Formula 1 Team						

Source: Originally developed by the author

As Table 1 illustrates, the increasing adoption and implementation of sustainability strategies and related policies, as common organisational practices within the F1 community, has largely depended on legitimization (i.e., ensuring external legitimacy by embracing institutionalised sustainability practices). In this process, external institutional pressure from governance and organisations, such as the FIA, race promoters, sponsors, environmental activists, and fan communities, has grown the expectations around sustainability. As the current F1 CEO, Stefano Domenicali, said in an interview: "...at the end of the day today if you don't have something to present in that landscape that is serious, no one wants to talk with you business-wise. If we are not credible in that landscape, no one is with you. Today we have so many partners, commercial partners working with us or with the teams, like never before. It means that what we are presenting is something that they embrace as a project..." (Fiano, 2022).

Table 1 also presents evidence indicating the alignment between the overall F1 sustainability management strategy and the three F1 teams' sustainability commitments. Viewed through the perspective of hierarchical governance structures, F1 management endeavors to lead a network of stakeholders (the F1 teams) toward better coordination. By deciding to impose new self-regulations, F1 has changed the technical regulations, introducing biofuels by 2026. Illustratively, this creates a collaborative effort between teams and their oil and gas partners to develop innovative biofuel solutions, leading to a positive impact on the future technical performance of the sport and the broader transportation and logistics industry. Furthermore, the imposition of a financial cap seeks to level the playing field in terms of teams' research and development expenditures, with the overarching objective of ensuring the enduring competitiveness and excitement of the F1 championship over the long term.

The three studied teams' approach also manifests through their individual endorsement and implementation of new environmental policies and practices for reducing their carbon footprint. These measures encompass the utilisation of recycled materials and the integration of renewable energy sources into their operations. Teams further enforce novel policies concerning their interactions with suppliers and other third-party entities, with the overarching objective of enhancing control and promoting environmentally sustainable logistics practices. However, original equipment manufacturer (OEM) teams, such as Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 team and BWT Alpine F1 Team firmly assert that embracing a sustainability agenda supports and aligns seamlessly with the overarching vision of their parent companies. In particular, the Mercedes-Benz and Renault Group in their capacity as mother companies promote sustainable technology and innovation, in support of a more environmentally friendly future in transportation. This view is further echoed by the BWT Alpine commercial manager: "F1

has been a lab for the automotive industry for the last 50 years. The mobility innovation developed by Renault in the 80s is now being implemented in all the cars in the world” (personal communication, 9 June 2022). F1 technology has further positive implications in society and as Chapman (2022, p. 13) put it eloquently: “Today a child could be rushed to Great Ormond Street Hospital in London in a protective cradle built by Williams, receive care from a surgical team modeled after Ferrari pit crew, and be monitored on the ward with the device from McLaren”.

As information from the interviews further indicated, the sustainability framework is inevitably accompanied by a range of transformations in organisation-wide value systems, norms, rules, structures, management processes and practices, controlling and decision-making mechanisms, including managers' and stakeholders' reflexive interpretations. In the realm of social impact, the surge of sustainability initiatives has significantly influenced the motivation of individuals working within F1, extending beyond just financial goals. By aligning employees' values with the team's organisational mission, a strong sense of belonging and a shared purpose emerges. Some teams, such as Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 Team and BWT Alpine F1 Team, shared that their management asked the staff about their values and beliefs before creating the team's sustainability strategy. This embraced strategy not only answers the fundamental 'why' for employees but also imbues their work with meaningful purpose and motivation. Reflecting on this, the commercial manager of the BWT Alpine F1 Team added: “When I joined the team in 2017, I remember even asking myself a lot of questions about what my role was and whether I should leave the F1 industry. Now I am proud of our sustainable strategy and I think we have a good vision” (personal communication, 9 June 2022).

The transformation on a corporate structural level is noticeable in two of the studied F1 teams (Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 Team and BWT Alpine F1 Team) marked by the appointment of internal sustainability directors, while Williams Racing has decided to approach an external consultant, indicating the growing importance of sustainable development. This is consistent with the concept of strategic human resource management (SHRM), where human capital is aligned with the strategic goals of the organisation.

Championing equality and diversity in the workforce stands as a pivotal mechanism for implementing the sustainable strategy across all three studied teams. Notably, at the Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 Team, the representation of individuals from diverse backgrounds has increased to 8.5% for people of color and 16% for the female workforce. It is also notable that the teams of Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 team and Williams Racing utilize influential figures within their ranks who serve as primary drivers of change within the broader F1 ecosystem.

As the commercial manager of Mercedes AMG Petronas suggested: “The team was pushed quite hard by Lewis at that time” (personal communication, 25 May 2022). As a prominent figure, the driver was a pivotal catalyst for instigating a cultural transformation emphasizing diversity and inclusivity. An illustrative instance of this commitment transpired in 2020 when the ‘Silver Arrows’ modified their car livery to black, thereby symbolizing the team’s dedication to endorsing diversity and equality. Moreover, inspired by Lewis Hamilton, F1 united all teams under the “We race as one” initiative to show the championship’s support in the fight against racism. Claire Williams, team principal of Williams Racing 2013 – 2020, is another influential internal force who has affected a cultural change towards fostering female workforce across diverse departments and corporate levels. Gender equality in F1 is also expressed through the newly created ‘F1 Academy’ category, which aims to develop and train young female drivers in the world of motorsport. Despite advocating for greater inclusion and diversity, F1 faces accusations of virtue signaling, as the sport predominantly comprises a white, affluent, elitist, and male demographic, with only superficial and tokenistic changes implemented (Næss & Chadwick, 2023).

The changing expectations and what F1 managers are actually expected to do concerning sustainability have also affected the teams’ sponsorship approach. In this regard, special emphasis is placed on the corporate culture and interpretations by the F1 commercial partnerships managers regarding the process of shaping sponsorship decisions. As the interviews asserted, sustainability has different meanings for the informants. This can be explained by the fact that everybody has different backgrounds, experiences, values and beliefs. The provided sustainability descriptions vary from “sustainability is the team’s movement into a direction, where we can enhance what we do, improve and innovate to reduce our footprint in the world and propose better solutions” (BWT Alpine commercial partnership manager, personal communication, 9 June 2022) to “sustainability is related to diversity and inclusion, I want the world to be more diverse, I want my girls to do whatever the boys can do” (Mercedes AMG Petronas F1 team, personal communication, 25 May 2022). Despite the different perspectives, all three commercial partnership managers asserted the significance of sustainability, underpinning its importance in the formulation of a cohesive sustainability-integrated strategy for their respective teams. It is also evident that the understanding of sustainability by F1 teams’ commercial partnership managers is influenced by the team’s primary sustainability focus points. In translating the team’s sustainability values, F1 teams’ commercial partnership managers actively seek partnerships that not only resonate with the team’s sustainability focus points but also amplify the message, fostering a collective commitment to sustainable practices within the realm of motorsports.

As a consequence, the three studied F1 teams have transformed their sponsorship strategies. The data from the interviews confirmed that this influence is notably evident in the disruption of engagements with industries historically associated with negative connotations, such as cigarettes, cryptocurrencies, gambling and alcohol. Even though those industries have big marketing budgets, the three teams do not include them in their market examination or go-to-market strategy. The Mercedes AMG Petronas commercial partnership manager supported the so-called “red-list” (i.e. completely inappropriate for brand alignment) industry approach by saying: “We don’t want to expose our fan base to stuff that we don’t think is appropriate” (personal communication, 25 May 2022). Nevertheless, teams prioritise the financial aspect of their partnerships as a crucial strategic resource, often complemented by free technology provisions. They steer clear of partnerships focused solely on operational structure-based resources. It is because the F1 teams are becoming more self-reliant and less dependent on external sources for competitive advantage in racing, developing over time internal competencies and know-how to achieve good results (Levitt & March, 1988).

The new commercial engagements within F1 are increasingly perceived as partnerships, instead of mere sponsorship. This is because the predominant trend in recent sponsorships within the Formula 1 domain revolves around the conceptual framework of impact. Essentially, F1 teams are leveraging their strengths and the potential of new partnerships to create a tangible difference for customers, partners, and other interested parties, while keeping the balance between the three main sustainability dimensions. An illustrative example from 2020 elucidates this paradigm shift: ARAMCO and Formula 1, along with Petronas and Mercedes AMG Formula 1, unveiled their partnerships driven by a common ambition to foster the development of novel sustainable fuels with wide-ranging very strong applications in both the automotive and aviation sectors. This aspect resonates strongly within the sports industry due to its intensely competitive environment.

It is noteworthy that F1 teams maintain substantial affiliations with the oil and gas industry, partnerships often perceived by some as a form of ‘greenwashing’. According to Næss (2020), those misleading campaigns allow some businesses to obtain social legitimacy, while continuing to operate in an unsustainable without image damages. Schwartz & Carroll (2003) argue this approach goes against all rules of corporate responsibility and in a similar vein, Anderson (1994, p. 382) stated that: “Today, professionals seem all too eager to commit financially motivated strategies indiscriminately without first taking a close look at the true ethical implications”.

However, it is essential to recognise that these partnerships are not merely emblematic of superficial sustainability efforts. Rather, they strategically

underpin the sport's very existence and its competitiveness, given the intrinsic link between the oil and gas industry and F1's operational requirements and performance. Furthermore, it is important to outline that these collaborations often engender substantial positive impacts within the transportation sector, contributing to advancements in sustainable solutions.

The three F1 teams are well aware of the controversial opinions about the sport's sustainability agenda. According to the three commercial representatives, there's a collective belief that the F1 falls short in advocating and educating broader audiences about its innovative contributions benefiting other industries. Moreover, there is frustration stemming from a perceived lack of a truly altruist commitment from rival competitors thus overshadowing the positive strides made in this domain. This was echoed by Mercedes AMG Petronas commercial manager who explicated that: "Our frustration as a F1 team is that we see a lot of other F1 teams talking about what they're planning to do. Yet our view is that that's not really good enough" (personal communication, 25 May, 2022). The three managers conveyed that sustainability represents a continuous 'journey' in F1, not merely a fleeting accomplishment. During the sponsorship negotiation process, the three teams invest considerable effort in discussing or even educating sponsors about F1 sustainability responsibilities, striving to showcase the sport's impact and create benefits for other business industries. Additionally, these three teams proactively include their existing partners in specialized sustainability working groups where the team's sustainability director actively contributes to shaping the partnership activation programme. Also, utilising their influential role the team's CEO could actively engage in sustainability-related partnership activations. This involvement may extend to participation in leadership workshops, aligning with the shared objective of nurturing and promoting the sustainability commitments of both parties. The collaboration between the commercial and other departments within the F1 teams presents the established internal organisational structure, incorporating a variety of cross-related activities to contribute to the organizational sustainability goals.

However, the interviewees emphasized that the inclusion of sustainability objectives in their sponsorship proposals is not straightforward. Furthermore, teams' commercial partnership managers admit that sustainability does not serve as a primary catalyst or a key driver for attracting new partners. This argument is supported by the statement made by the commercial manager of Williams Racing who described sustainability as a "hygiene factor" (personal communication, 3 August, 2022). This term elucidates the notion that discussions about sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) concepts may be incorporated into sponsorship activation programmes but not decisive for achieving the partnership's objectives and the desired outcomes. That raises the point that sponsorships within

F1 are individually tailor-made by shaping them as assets package to match the specific requirements and preferences of each partner, thereby rendering sustainability a variable rather than a predominant consideration in the partnership discourse. It is worth noting that Business-to-Consumer (B2C) engagements exhibit a greater proclivity towards active collaboration with sustainability-related themes, as opposed to Business-to-Business (B2B) arrangements. Within the B2B model, the primary impetus for participation in the F1 resides in the development of technological advantages. This phenomenon explains why sustainability does not consistently emerge as the predominant determinant motivating brands to engage in Formula 1 partnership initiatives. Rather, the sport's recent growth and surging popularity are driven by its expansion into new markets, engaging digital content, such as 'Drive to Survive' and the continual evolution of technological innovation persist as the principal incentives compelling sponsors to enter the realm of Formula 1. It is also evident that most of the F1 partners are B2B companies thus supporting the broader acceptance of the sport as a hub for technology and innovation. In Geach's (2015) study it is also discovered that 61% of F1 fans lean towards selecting a sponsor's product rather than a competing brand, and 47% of these fans have purposefully bought products from motor racing sponsors due to the sponsorship. This illustrates that F1 remains a robust marketing platform for brands, despite the sport's contradictory image regarding environmental and social aspects of sustainability.

Conclusion

While the sustainability agenda has indeed emerged as an externally driven imperative for the F1 ecosystem, it has gradually become a new framework for steering organisational priorities and practices. Nevertheless, the multifaceted nature of the sustainability concept and its different interpretations by multiple stakeholders introduces new managerial challenges and instigates F1 to adopt and incrementally implement a set of corresponding strategies and policies. The main motivations for the three researched F1 teams for adopting the idea of sustainable development have both strategic and instrumental implications. The former serves legitimacy aims or to be perceived by their stakeholders as relevant and "on the track", while the latter concerns harvesting marketing and commercial benefits. The evolving sustainability landscape within F1 also has profound implications for the complexity of sponsorship engagements. F1 teams are adapting by revising their sponsorship propositions, altering partnership outreach strategies, and repositioning their long-term objectives, all with the overarching aim of gaining a competitive advantage while concurrently implementing the team's sustainability commitment. This prompts broader criticism toward F1 for seemingly leveraging sustainability values solely to secure and enhance financial

gains rather than delivering additional value across multiple stakeholders. Also, our data suggest that sustainability is not a constant requirement or a decisive factor in sponsorship relationships in the context of F1. The lack of a more selective approach by F1 teams when soliciting sponsorships driven by sustainability focus would negatively affect the very fundament of F1 venture. One of the limitations of our study is that it covers only three F1 teams and the perspective of the rest of the seven squads' commercial representatives would potentially deliver a comprehensive and more nuanced picture. In this vein, further research is also needed for a deeper understanding of how the teams' sustainable development strategy impacts the sponsorship engagements with current and new partners.

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