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Sustainability and Sport: An Exploratory Study on Students of Rome's Universities

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Abstract: (1) Background: The importance of sport in advancing the roadmap for the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda was reaffirmed at the 7th Summit on Smart Cities and Sport (Lausanne, 26–28 October 2020), where it was emphasized that developing a culture of sustainability among younger generations is crucial. Given this scenario, the present study focuses on two main research questions: "Is there a diffusion of an environmentally oriented culture among university students?" and "Is there a relationship between sports' world and environmentally oriented culture?" (2) Methods: To establish the empirical framework (279 questionnaires received), we used web-based survey techniques with a Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) procedure. (3) Results: The analysis results show that the sample considers environmental sustainability as a part of a more comprehensive understanding of sustainability, which reflects a sense of fear for uncertainty in the future. The second finding suggests that sport does not play a significant role in shaping awareness. (4) Conclusions: The cultural and generational background must be considered for better understanding of the research results, especially in Italy where it appears that sustainability is not considered a priority.

Keywords: sport; sustainable attitudes; sustainable practices; web survey; environment

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1. Introduction

In a world where environmental challenges are increasingly urgent and attention to the future of the planet is constantly growing, sport presents itself as a key vehicle to promote positive changes and to educate younger generations to become responsible and to be aware citizens. In this scenario, a culture of sustainability can be identified as the product of a conscious generational approach to virtuous practices [1]. In dependence, as sport ecology states [2–4], sport practices are increasingly in interaction with sustainable practices.

The concept of sustainability has become increasingly relevant since the late 1980s, initially focusing on the environment. Its international diffusion was marked by the 1987 Brundtland Report [5], a real break from past paradigms and one that helped to make the environmental issue a political, economic, social, and ethical priority. Subsequently, the emergence of the concept of sustainable development began to challenge the anthropocentric view of traditional development models, broadening the focus to other living beings and future generations.

On this side, sport is significant when placed within the conceptual framework of sustainability. The intrinsic principles promoted by the sports context are universal in nature and enjoy global recognition. Through the concepts of respect, inclusion, and understanding, the United Nations (UN) endorses the role of sport in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [6]. The UN has recognized sport as a relevant catalyst for

sustainable progress, recognizing its ability to raise awareness for climate protection and to foster greater community participation in protecting the local environment. At the same time, sport is identified as a tool for educating young people about environmental sustainability and climate change (UN) [7]. Sport acts upon several areas of the SDGs: it promotes healthy lifestyles and overall well-being, it guarantees quality education, contributes to gender equality, stimulates economic growth and decent employment, reduces disparities among nations, contributes to urban resilience, security and sustainability, and, finally, it promotes the building of peaceful societies.

The intrinsic essence of sports emerges as an unparalleled opportunity on a global scale, providing a unique contribution to human progress. Simultaneously, the significant impact of students in shaping the future state of the environment emphasizes the fundamental importance of integrating and institutionalizing sustainability-related issues. In this context, the interconnection between sports practice and environmental commitment proves to be of crucial relevance, introducing fertile ground for in-depth investigations and reflections within the context of this research.

Considering the delay in the implementation of the SDGs in Italy, it is relevant to wonder if sport plays a relevant role as a key tool for achieving the goals of the 2030 Agenda [8].

The objective of this study is to investigate the environmental attitudes and sustainable practices of university students in the city of Rome. In addition, we want to investigate whether there is a relationship between sports and environmental attitudes. Thus, we divided the research questions to best cover our investigation plan:

1RQ: Is there a diffusion of an environmentally oriented culture among university students? This research question is subdivided into three sub-questions:

1.1—The first sub-question concerns the diffusion of sustainable practices among students (additive index on sustainable practices).

1.2—The second sub-question investigates the existence of attitudes and their types towards environmental causes.

1.3—The third sub-question focuses on the importance attributed to environmental issues compared to other value dimensions.

2RQ: Is there a relationship between membership in the sports world and environmentally oriented culture?

From our research questions, the present study fits within two broad areas of inquiry. The first one focuses on sustainable practices, attitudes, and various aspects of environmentalism, including attitudes and behaviors related to the environment, while as to the second field of research that inspired this work, reference is made to the ecology of sport, specifically through its sociological branch.

1.1. Interconnections between Environmental Knowledge, Pro-Environmental Attitudes, and Sustainable Behaviors

The concept of environmental knowledge emerges as a key element in raising awareness and understanding of environmental problems and their solutions. Its relevance lies in the fact that an extension of understanding of such issues can elicit increased individual interest and awareness. However, it is crucial to note that such broadening of knowledge is not automatically translated into behavioral changes [9,10]. Attitudes, understood as positive or negative manifestations towards specific situations and objects with a particular intensity and relevance [11], emerge as key elements in environmental education. The evaluation of attitudes takes on a critical role in relation to green-oriented lifestyles, consumption habits, and multiple solutions proposed to address environmental issues. This multidimensional approach provides a scientific basis for examining how attitudes, anchored in specific contexts, influence behavioral choices in the ecological domain. In fact, the process of acquiring environmental knowledge, combined with the assessment of attitudes, represents a fundamental dual dimension to understanding the complex dynamic between environmental awareness and behavior. Such in-depth understanding is essential

for developing strategies and targeted interventions that aim at translating knowledge into sustainable action.

The debate on the interaction between green attitudes and sustainable behavior is therefore a central issue in research [12]. While theory suggests that positive attitudes towards the environment should naturally be translated into pro-environmental behaviors, recent evidence, especially in relation to Generation Z [13], indicates a substantial gap between strong environmentalist beliefs and limited involvement in actual practices [14]. The significant role of students in influencing the future state of the environment underscores the crucial importance of integrating and institutionalizing sustainability issues [15]. Analysis of environmental attitudes, reflecting on generally favorable views on the environment [12], can detect a diversity of perspectives within the population.

The salient dimensions of individual awareness, such as environmental knowledge, values, attitudes, willingness to act, and actual behaviors [16,17], emerge as critical parameters to understand the complex interplay between attitudes and behaviors related to the environment. However, the relationship between increased environmental knowledge and behavioral changes is complex, requiring in-depth analysis of individual decision-making dynamics and the influence of multiple contextual factors [9,10]. The in-depth study of attitudes, defined as positive or negative evaluations of specific situations and objects with intensity and relevance [11], offers a key perspective to explore the link among environmental education, green lifestyles, consumption habits, and solutions to ecological problems. A comprehensive understanding of these aspects forms the basis for developing awareness strategies and educational interventions aimed at promoting effective pro-environmental behaviors. Student behavior emerges as an intrinsically interconnected phenomenon with a complex network of sustainable and social factors, as highlighted by research conducted by Lukman et al. (2013) [18] and Asunta (2004) [19].

This interaction expands beyond the individual, involving significant influences from the immediate context, including family, friends, neighbors, and education. Kagawa's (2007) [20] analysis emphasizes the crucial importance of the availability of options and infrastructure, as well as the degree of sacrifice involved, as key elements that shape students' environmental behavior [21–23]. Research indicates that students are more likely to adopt "green" activities when such behaviors require small adjustments in daily lifestyle. Sustainable education thus emerges as a strategic lever in guiding students' pro-environmental behavior, acting through several modalities. Firstly, it manifests itself through the transfer of knowledge and values, providing students with a solid information base on which to base their choices [24]. In addition, environmental education acts as a social catalyst, shaping the perception of the school as a context in which pro-environmental values are not only welcomed, but also promoted. Evidence supports the idea that people who exhibit such behaviors in various contexts assess specific values positively [25], and that these values significantly influence pro-environmental behaviors [26].

To sum up, students' behavior is the result of a complex interplay between immediate environmental influences, social factors, and the impact of education, outlining an intricate picture that requires a thorough understanding to promote pro-environmental behaviors.

Individual assessment of one's consideration as an environmentally friendly person is probably associated with a wide range of pro-environmental behaviors, such as waste management, transportation choices, and purchasing patterns. These factors are fundamental to guide behavior in different situations, providing a broader perspective on the dynamics of "green" behavior. Some scholars, such as Kasser (2009) [1], have emphasized the importance of understanding and harnessing the deeper aspects of the individual, such as values and identity, as fundamental to promote sustainable behavior. The implication of these deeper constructs is crucial for effective change towards pro-environmental behaviors. Failure to engage these elements can result in fragmented, slow, and disconnected change, with each behavior adopted or rejected separately by individuals.

These risks generate a "rebound" phenomenon, in which greener behaviors in one context may result in reduced sustainability in another, undermining overall efforts [27].

1.2. Sustainability in Sport and Ecosystem Complexity: The Social Ecology of Sport and Bourdieu's Influence

With reference to the second strand of inquiry that provided the conceptual foundation for this investigation, we lean towards social sport ecology, as it constitutes a field of study devoted to exploring the interactive dynamics between sport activity, its ecosystem complex, and the natural environment. This precisely and strategically chosen term embraces a broad definition of sport, encompassing all its actors: athletes, coaches, managers, fans, suppliers, and other relevant actors in the field. From the perspective of scientific research and concern for the natural environment, sport ecology emerges as a more suitable designation than concepts such as sport sustainability or green sport, although the latter are in common use among professionals in the field. Many studies have adopted the term sport sustainability to refer to the investigation of the intersection of sport and the natural environment [28,29]. However, it should be noted that the term sustainability spans broader domains than the natural environment or natural resources, including aspects such as cultural, social, and economic sustainability [30]. As a result, using the term sport sustainability could dilute the focus on the natural environment and risk overlapping with other useful disciplines, such as sport for development and the sociology of sport. Because of its robustness, sport ecology takes the form of an expansion of the rich scientific traditions of human ecology, extending into several field-specific academic disciplines. This frames our approach within the social ecology of sport, based on the hypothesis that participants in sports develop a reciprocal interaction with the natural environment. Through the use of a well-established theoretical framework derived from Trendafilova and Chalip's (2007) [31] prior work on the political economy of managing outdoor sport environments, we refine and intensify this analytical perspective and integrate it with our search field.

In the literature, the complex interconnected nature of identifying the determinants of engagement in physical activity has been recognized [32].

Based on models of health behavior, numerous scholars from different disciplines have proposed the adoption of multilevel approaches, considering organizational, environmental, and individual factors that might influence health behaviors, such as engagement in physical activity [32–34]. Such ecological and social–ecological models constitute conceptual frameworks that recognize the mutual influence between individual behavior and the surrounding environment [35]. In general, these models address engagement in physical activity by considering intrapersonal, social, and physical environment factors. Intrapersonal factors may embrace demographics, biology, behavior, and beliefs. Socio-environmental factors may include social support, social climate, culture, policies regulating incentives for physical activity, and policies governing resources and infrastructure related to physical activity. Physical environment factors are divided between the natural environment and the built environment, which includes architecture, transportation, recreational infrastructure, and the urban/suburban environment [32].

One such model, Lynch's socio-ecological model of health [36], originates from social epidemiology and emphasizes the broadest social factors affecting health before considering the individual within that context.

Within a multilevel ecological framework, the intricate interactions among a multitude of factors are examined. However, studies reporting the influence of these factors on environmental attitudes and sustainable practices are limited, especially within a specific group such as university students belonging to the sports world and living in a metropolitan city. The general objective of this review is to reflect on the progress made and to assess whether, in the new generations and within the sports context, there is environmental awareness and whether it can be further enhanced through specific behaviors in a clearly defined environment. Following the framework of social sport ecology, understanding sustainability through the perspective of the social benefit of sports is crucial for analyzing the various behaviors, attitudes, or thoughts of individuals oriented towards the promotion of a well-being-related strategy. This approach adopts a holistic perspective involving

socially sustainable identity models that provide the best conditions for individual social positioning [37].

Consequently, it is essential to broaden the investigation into the influence of sports on the sustainability of the daily habits of young athletes, recognized by the term "spill-over effect" [38]. The spillover effect can occur in a positive (green), negative (gray), or non-existent manner [39]. This concept refers to the tendency of attitudes and behaviors acquired in a sport context to spill over or extend into other aspects of the daily life of an individual. Some studies that have compared sport contexts with everyday contexts have shown limited temporal sustainability of the spill-over effect, with even insignificant or non-existent influence of these contexts [40–42]

This discourse is related to the centrality that can be attributed to sport as a vehicle of positive values for the development of a culture of sustainability [43–45]. The quest for a healthier lifestyle drives both adults and young people to devote their free time to sports, with their choice of training also reflecting their perception of the value of health [46]. The importance of sport in reducing modifiable health risk factors is unquestionable, and it is crucial to understand its interconnection with lifestyles, understood as the set of behaviors and habits that reflect the individual's daily life [47] and health-related behavior patterns based on possible choices [48]. In his essay "Sport and Social Class" [49], Bourdieu examines the differences in sports practices among different social groups. As part of considerations of sustainability in sport, he sets out to explore how people develop an interest in sports and, more generally, in adopting an active and sustainable lifestyle. Bourdieu investigates the conditions that make possible the adherence to different sports practices, considering not only factors such as leisure time and economic capital, but also the meanings and functions attributed to these practices by different social classes. These meanings and functions are closely related to the tastes and preferences developed through social habitus and can also be linked to the idea of a sustainable lifestyle that promotes health and well-being, both individual and collective. Habitus, in the broader context of sustainability in sport, can represent a kind of "sustainable mindset". This mindset can influence the choice of sustainable sports practices, contributing to a lifestyle that considers environmental and health impacts as interconnected factors. In this sense, Bourdieu's concept of habitus offers a valuable lens to understand how sport culture and fitness maintenance practices can be shaped by individuals' sustainable dispositions, with a focus on the balance between health and sustainability. It becomes critical to wonder if the interaction between sport and sustainability is a driver of virtuous practices in terms of sustainability. In the field of sports, many inescapable values contribute to the daily achievement of goals, and among them there is a sense of teamwork, respect for others and "field" inclusion, determination, perseverance, the ability to make sacrifices, an attitude of listening, competition, loyalty, honesty, and joy [50,51].

2. Methods

This paper aims to investigate the environmental attitudes and sustainable practices of university students in the city of Rome. We also want to find out if there is a relationship between sport and environmental attitudes. To achieve our cognitive objective and build empirical documentation, we utilized web-based survey (W.B.S.) techniques with the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) procedure. The questionnaire was completed individually, autonomously, and anonymously using a self-administration technique. We administered the survey through the Google Forms survey platform, which simplified the administration method and made it easier for students to participate. The server-side Google Forms platform [52] allowed us to consult the responses throughout the investigation period and export the data in xls format to an Excel spreadsheet. This platform also facilitated a functional layout for mobile web browsers installed on various smartphone types. The questionnaire was constructed to gather information on five dimensions. The first dimension concerns the socio-demographic information of the sample while the second dimension concerns the practice of sport. The third dimension was designed to investigate

attention to environmental issues to understand students' attitudes and feelings towards this sensitive issue. The results of the analysis conducted by the Social Observatory in a study on sentiment towards climate change in 2021 [53] was taken as a reference to operationalize this dimension. The fourth dimension concerns the implementation of sustainable practices during physical activity and daily life. It is based on the importance placed on sustainable practices during physical activity and in everyday life. This dimension takes its cue from the questionnaire administered by the first survey on sustainability in winter sports main results, called NEVEUISP 2008 [54]. And finally, the fifth dimension aims at detecting the value universe of the respondents concerning the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. The questionnaire is a structured one with a few open questions. Batteries of Likert scales with four response modes (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, fairly disagree, strongly agree) and frequency scales with four modes (never, rarely, often, always) were used to assess the third and fourth dimensions. For the Likert scale, we chose to exclude the neutral category in line with Ron's (1991) [55] considerations. Asun and colleagues (2016) [56] identify four reasons to exclude the neutral category from the Likert scale. Ron (1991) [55] points out how social desirability associated with the treatment of certain issues can push respondents towards the neutral categories. For the frequency scale, the categories were chosen according to Vagias (2006) [57]. The Cantril scale [58] was used to detect the fifth dimension. The online questionnaire was pre-tested on a small sample of 20 people. This was in order to eliminate possible misunderstandings and distortions of the questions by the students. The feedback from the sample in the pretest allowed us to modify the operational definition of some questions in the questionnaire. The Google Forms platform was used to collect the responses. The questionnaire link was sent to the students and took approximately 15 min to complete. The construction of the sample followed a non-proportional quota sampling logic, using the field of study as a stratification variable [58]. Based on ministerial documents, we identified three disciplinary areas: (1) medical and health; (2) scientific and technological; (3) humanistic and social. Specifically, the questionnaire was administered to students from different disciplinary areas: medical/health, scientific/technological, and humanistic/social. The sample size was 279 students. The survey started in July 2023 and ended in October 2023. Monovariate, bivariate (Chi-square and Anova), and multivariate analysis techniques were used to analyze the data. To answer the first research question, the data collected on the third, fourth, and fifth dimensions were first summarized and analyzed. The third dimension was analyzed using an additive index (sustainable practices index). The fourth dimension was analyzed by applying principal component analysis to the Likert scale and then extracting three factorial indexes (environmental alarmism; environmental activism; anti-environmentalism). By comparing the average importance of environmental issues with other social and economic issues mentioned in the scale, the fifth dimension was analyzed. To answer the second research question, two ANOVAs were conducted. The first one had as the independent variable whether or not one participates in sport (dichotomous variable) and the second one had as independent variable whether or not one belongs to the world of sport (working or studying in sport; dichotomous variable). In both ANOVAs, the dependent variables were those extracted from the analysis of the third, fourth, and fifth dimensions; specifically, for the third dimension, the additive index of sustainable practices (cardinal variable) [58]; for the fourth dimension, the index of environmental alarmism (cardinal variable), the index of environmental activism (cardinal variable), and the index of anti-environmentalism (cardinal variable); and for the fifth dimension, averages obtained from environmental issues (cardinal variable).

3. Results

The sample analyzed had a male predominance of 53.4%. The average age of the students was 23.9 years, with a media of 23 years. In terms of educational qualifications, 56.9% of the students had a bachelor's degree, 36.2% had a high school diploma, 5.4% had a master's degree and 1.4% had a postgraduate degree. It follows that more than

half of the respondents were currently enrolled in a master's degree program. Regarding socio-economic background, 59.9% of the sample indicated that they belonged to a middle socio-economic class and 19.4% to a low-middle socio-economic class, followed by 17.6% who identified themselves as belonging to a middle-high socio-economic class, 2.5% considered themselves as belonging to a lower socio-economic class and only 0.7% identified themselves as belonging to a high socio-economic class. Overall, 46.6% of our sample reported that they were in employment and of those, 63.8% reported that they worked in sports. In terms of sporting activity, a large proportion of the sample was active. In fact, 77.6% of the students analyzed declared that they practiced physical activity or sport, and in particular, 43.7% practiced physical activity, 18.3% practiced an individual sport, and 15.4% practiced a team sport (see Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic information of the sample.

Gender	Male (53.4%)—Female (46.2%)—Non-binary (0.4%)
Age	Average 23.9—Median 23
Qualification	High school (36.2%)—Bachelor's Degree (56.9%)—Master's Degree (5.4%)—Postgraduate (1.4%)
Socio-economic class	Low (2.5%)—Middle-low (19.4%)—Middle (59.9%)—Middle-high (17.6%)—High (0.7%)
Employment	Workers (46.6%)—Non-workers (53.4%)
Physical activity	Individual sport (18.3%)—Team sport (15.4%)—Physical activity (43.7%)—No activity (22.6%)

Source: elaboration on our data.

A scenario in which particular attention is paid to the consumption of energy, water, and plastics emerges when we analyze the sustainable practices implemented in daily life (see Table 2). More than 70% of those surveyed said that they always or often try to take these aspects into account in their daily lives. More specifically, 78.1% of the sample stated that they often or always try to reduce energy consumption (lighting, air conditioning). In addition to energy consumption, particular attention was also paid to water consumption; 74.2% of students said they often or always try to reduce their water consumption. Similarly, 73.4% of the sample said that among the sustainable practices they implement in their daily lives, they choose to reduce plastic consumption. By contrast, vehicles received little attention, with less than half of the respondents (42.7%) often or always avoiding using them, especially private vehicles like cars or scooters. This is the aspect that respondents paid the least attention to in terms of habits and sustainability in their daily lives. Moreover, among the sustainable practices, respondents' attention to the sustainability of the products they use (clothing, accessories, and appliances) registered 43.7% of 'often' and 'always' responses, as shown in the tables below. In addition, never or rarely using organic or plastic-free food products was reported by 52.7% of respondents.

In order to obtain an overview of the sustainable practices implemented by the respondents, we created an additive index by assigning a value of 1 to the response modes 'often' or 'always' and a value of 0 to the modes 'never' or 'rarely'. In this way, we summed the values to obtain an index ranging from 0 to 8 and calculated the average to represent the propensity for sustainable activity. The sample analyzed declared an average of 4.75 sustainable practices, with a media of 5 (Cfr. Table 3).

Table 2. Sustainable practice frequencies in daily life.

	Never	Rarely	Often	Always	Often + Always
I try to reduce energy consumption (lighting, air conditioning)	3.9%	17.9%	46.2%	31.9%	78.1%
I try to reduce water consumption	3.6%	22.2%	49.5%	24.7%	74.2%
I try to reduce plastic consumption	3.9%	22.6%	48%	25.4%	73.4%
I keep abreast of environmental issues	2.5%	34.1%	42.7%	20.8%	63.5%
I try to use organic or plastic-free food products	11.5%	41.2%	35.1%	12.2%	52.7%
I try to reduce the consumption of polluting detergents	8.2%	40.1%	36.2%	15.4%	51.6%
I am careful about the sustainability of the products I use (clothing, accessories, devices, etc.)	14.7%	41.6%	29%	14.7%	43.7%
I avoid means of transportation, especially if private (Ex. Car or scooter)	26.5%	30.8%	33%	9.7%	42.7%

Source: Elaboration on our data.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of sustainable practices index.

	Sustainable Practices Index
N	279
Missing	0
Average	4.75
Median	5
Standard deviation	2.25
Minimum	0
Maximum	8

Source: elaboration on our data.

As well as sustainable behavior, the survey also looked at how people felt about different aspects of environmental protection. Students were asked to respond to a Likert scale relating to environmental issues, ranging from 1 'strongly disagree' to 4 'strongly agree'. A principal component analysis was then carried out, resulting in three distinct factors. The first was called 'Environmental alarmism', which included concerns about the future due to the environmental crisis ('Pollution causes disease and death', Environmental crisis endangers our lives, 'Energy waste is an environmental problem', 'Melting glaciers are destroying our future', 'I am worried about the health of our planet'). The second, defined as 'environmental activism', includes the tendency to agree with social environmental protest activities ('If I could, I would take part in environmental protests', Young people who daub artwork in environmental protests are right ', 'I share Greta Thunberg's struggles'). The third, called 'Anti-environmentalism', covers indifference to the environmental crisis ('It's useless for me to sort rubbish, they throw it all away anyway', Doing recycling collection is useless ', The earth's temperature rise is a natural phenomenon, not caused by humans ', 'What drives me not to waste energy is mainly to save money'). Once the factors were extracted, they were normalized to a range from 0 to 100. Looking at the mean scores, we can see that there is some concern about environmental issues, so much so that the first component "Environmental alarmism" has a mean score of 74.02. This is different for 'environmental activism' and 'anti-environmentalism', which have a mean score of 42.21 and 44.58, respectively (Table 4).

Table 4. Factor loadings of the 18 items on the first three extracted components (the rotation 'Varimax' rotation was used).

	Components			Uniqueness
	Environmental Alarmism	**Environmental Activism**	**Anti-Environmentalism**	
Pollution is causing disease and death	0.780			0.388
Environmental crisis endangers our lives	0.763			0.382
Energy waste is an environmental problem	0.741			0.428
Melting glaciers are destroying our future	0.639			0.565
I'm worried about the health of our planet	0.604			0.482
Excessive consumption of raw materials is no longer sustainable for our planet	0.450			0.740
I'm angry at people who don't recycle	0.320	0.305		0.758
If I could, I would take part in environmental protests'		0.786		0.326
Young people who daub artwork in environmental protests are right		0.711		0.487
I share Greta Thunberg's struggles		0.709		0.375
Greta Thunberg makes her protests because she wants to be famous		−0.487		0.571
Our future will be destroyed by our economic system		0.414		0.737
'It's useless for me to sort rubbish, they throw it all away anyway'			0.661	0.497
Doing recycling collection is useless			0.573	0.479
The earth's temperature rise is a natural phenomenon, not caused by humans			0.552	0.627
'What drives me not to waste energy is mainly to save money			0.546	0.683
Keeping air conditioning on all the time is expensive, more than harmful to the environment			0.480	0.727
Pollution is a serious issue, but not as urgent as it is described			0.390	0.767

Source: elaboration on our data.

A focus on environmental issues also emerges from the analysis of the value dimension (see Table 5). Respondents were asked to rate from 1 to 10 issues related to the environment and environmental sustainability (pollution, melting glaciers, deforestation, etc.), as well as other issues related to the economy and society in general. Analysis of the averages shows a particular focus on issues related to environmental sustainability (pollution = 8.73; global warming = 8.52; melting glaciers = 8.15), but also social (violence against women = 8.77; bullying = 8.69) and economic (unemployment = 8.43). The country's institutional stability is also a concern for respondents (corruption = 8.58; fascism = 8). On the other hand, issues that are sometimes linked to general conspiracy theories are less worrying. These include chemical trails (5.55) and vaccines (4.38). An overall look at the table reveals a sample of students who are quite concerned about issues that have an impact on society in a number of different ways.

To explore the possible relationship between sport and sustainability, we decided to analyze whether those in the world of sport have a greater propensity for environmentalism and sustainability. We identified two non-exclusive groups related with the world of sport: the first is made up of those who practice sport (sport practice), while the second is made

up of those who work in sport or are studying a sport-related course at university (sport word). To find out if there was a difference between the identified groups and those who did not, we used the ANOVA technique.

Table 5. Average score on the Cantril scale (1–10) on social, economic, and environmental issues.

	Mean	Std. Dev
Cancers	8.79	1.772
Violence against women	8.77	2.126
Pollution	8.73	1.747
Bullying	8.69	2.026
Corruption	8.58	1.856
Racism	8.55	2.317
Political decay	8.53	1.845
Global warming	8.52	1.866
Homophobia	8.43	2.368
Unemployment	8.43	1.801
Tax evasion	8.29	1.858
Deforestation	8.28	1.971
Fires	8.20	2.012
Melting glaciers	8.15	1.918
Illiteracy	8.14	2.176
Fascism	8.00	2.632
Digital privacy violation	7.90	2.265
Obesity	7.83	2.084
School dropout	7.76	2.298
Web/social addiction	7.53	2.249
Fake news	7.51	2.280
Conspiracy	6.83	2.678
Great powers	6.42	3.006
Social challenges	6.33	2.770
Chemical trails	5.55	3.437
Vaccines	4.38	3.173
Global health	3.52	0.667

Source: elaboration on our data.

As can be seen in Table 6, the two groups with links to sport are not more sensitive or concerned about the environment than those without links to sport. This is confirmed by the ANOVA, which shows that those involved in sport do not score higher on the environmentalism aspects ("Environmental alarmism", "anti-environmentalism") or on the sustainable practices index. There is a significant relationship but in the opposite direction. The post hoc test performed after finding the significance of the relationship between sport groups and environmental activism shows that those in the sports world are less likely to accept the actions of environmental activists. Even when looking at the individual sustainable practices implemented, the differences between the groups do not emerge. In fact, the Chi-square test applied to the individual practices does not show any significant differences. In other words, both groups pay attention to the same sustainable practices, such as plastic consumption and water and energy consumption.

Table 6. Influence of sport on sustainable practice index and attitudes (ANOVA).

Type of Sports Membership	Work or Study		Practice	
Sustainable Dimensions	**F**	**p**	**F**	**p**
Sustainability practice index	0.06	0.813	0.25	0.614
Environmental Alarmism index	2.01	0.157	1.77	0.184
Environmental Activism index	22.71	0.000	7.36	0.007
Anti-Environmentalism index	0.39	0.530	1.37	0.243

Source: elaboration on our data.

Even when comparing the averages for environmental issues, i.e., melting glaciers, global warming, fires, and deforestation, there are no differences between the groups (see Table 7). If we try to insert a third variable between the world of sport and environmental issues, the overall picture does not change. However, there are some small exceptions.

Table 7. Influence of sport on environmental issues (ANOVA).

Type of Sports Membership	Work or Study		Practice	
Sustainable Dimensions	**F**	**Sig.**	**F**	**Sig.**
Melting glaciers	1.10	0.295	1.7	0.193
Global warming	0.00	1.00	0.27	0.602
Fires	0.04	0.837	0.45	0.504
Deforestation	0.06	0.8	0.553	0.458

Source: elaboration on our data.

Regarding the sustainability index and the approaches to environmental issues, differences between the groups do not emerge even when we introduce third socio-demographic variables. In fact, what was observed in the ANOVA did not change if we differentiated the analysis by gender (male–female), age (under 24/over 24), social class (low-medium–high) or area of origin (Rome, Province of Rome, other). Regarding environmental issues, on the other hand, we find some differences in the group of subjects involved in sports, but none in the group of those doing sports. Compared to their counterparts, the ANOVA divided by groups tells us that those who are inserted in the sporting world (a) show greater apprehension about fires if they are over 24; if they are men, they show greater attention to pollution and deforestation; and finally they show greater attention in the group of lower-middle social extraction.

4. Discussion

In the analyzed sample of students, their inclination towards sustainable practices is a relevant aspect. It can indicate their concrete and voluntary adherence to behaviors that aim to respect the environment. This orientation could be interpreted as a positive response to the growing awareness about the global impact of individual actions and their value attribution. The sensitivity of younger generations of university students to environmental issues adds further significance to this inclination, implying personal and emotional empowerment. The conducted research has revealed a significant aspect of the adoption of pro-environmental behaviors among university students: a predisposition to engage in "green" activities when they require only minor adjustments to daily lifestyles. The analysis of responses provided by the interviewees shows a comprehensive picture of the sustainable habits and practices of university students. The data comprise a variety of attitudes and behaviors, highlighting areas where students demonstrate heightened awareness and commitment to sustainability, as well as aspects that may require increased focus and awareness. This phenomenon, while seemingly intuitive, is substantiated by a body of theories and research within the realms of behavior and sustainable culture [9,10,15,16].

This suggests that students not only adopt sustainable practices but are also aware of environmental challenges and the widest implications of their actions. This conjunction of sustainable practices and environmental sensitivity could reflect a cultural change alive in the younger generations, accompanied by virtuous practices and awareness of sustainability issues. The theoretical approach based on the social ecology of sport [2,4,29,31] has proven to be essential in providing a comprehensive framework, integrating various social, economic, and environmental issues. It emphasizes the importance of considering these intricate dynamics in designing strategies to promote sustainable behaviors. Additionally, the application of Bourdieu's habitus theory [49] has enriched the understanding of how sports culture and fitness practices are shaped by individuals' sustainable dispositions. This underscores the necessity of promoting a sustainable lifestyle that synergistically connects the impact on the environment and the health.

We have identified three different conceptual forms through factor analysis, which reflect different cognitive approaches to the environmental issue: alarmism, activism, and denial. These constructs allow us to explore the various perspectives adopted by students in the context of environmental issues.

First of all, alarmism represents an approach in which individuals manifest a high level of concern and awareness about environmental challenges. This perspective can be associated with an urgent and critical perception of environmental issues, often fueled by scientific evidence or increased exposure to environmental issues through media. On the other hand, activism involves recognizing environmental challenges and taking action to mitigate them. This perspective reflects the active role taken by individuals in promoting sustainable behaviors and participating in environmental awareness initiatives. Finally, denial is an approach in which individuals downplay or ignore the relevance of environmental issues; a perspective that could derive from a lack of awareness, a lack of a culture of sustainability, incorrect information, or a distorted perception of the seriousness of environmental problems.

To effectively address any gaps in environmental communication and awareness, it is crucial to comprehend the reasons behind the approach utilized. This forms the basis for possible future developments in the present research. Adopting qualitative research methods, such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews, can assist in gaining a deeper understanding of sustainability representations in the reference sample, as further explained ahead.

Focusing on the sample of individuals linked to the world of sport, whether for study, work, or sports practice, offers an interesting perspective on the presumed association between this category and a greater inclination towards environmental issues. The results indicate that the group linked to the world of sport does not show significant deviations from the rest of the sample. Indeed, the sports context, while emerging as a potential catalyst for pro-environmental behaviors, did not exhibit significant differences compared to the rest of the sample. In this context, we encounter a phenomenon of "neutral spillover", where the adoption of sustainable practices within the sports domain does not translate into a substantial impact on the overall sustainability of daily habits. This result can be interpreted considering the complex dynamics characterizing spillover, which can manifest in positive, negative, or neutral forms [38,39]. The collected data indicate that, despite students' engagement in sports, the positive influence derived from sustainable behaviors in this specific context does not significantly extend to their daily practices. This "neutral spillover" phenomenon could be attributed to various factors, including identity and situational elements associated with sports activities, which may not necessarily reflect a comprehensive commitment to sustainability outside of this confined context. The literature emphasizes that spillover effects can vary and are based on different contexts and types of behaviors [38]. In this case, the sports context might act as an isolated arena where individuals adopt pro-environmental behaviors without extending such commitment to their daily habits. Therefore, while sports may represent fertile ground for promoting sustainable values, it is crucial to recognize that spillover effects can manifest in complex

and nuanced ways, requiring careful and contextual analysis to fully understand their dynamics. This finding raises several questions and calls for a more in-depth reflection on the relationship between the culture of sport and the culture of sustainability, following the prismatic definition of culture as a complex construct conveyed by attitudes, beliefs, symbolic, historical, and social values that is consolidated through the medium of society and the public and private educational dimension [59]. This emerges strongly in the sports dimension of culture [60] as in the one of sustainability. From a scientific point of view, these findings could indicate the need to challenge certain cultural conventions or stereotypes that automatically link sports practice to increased environmental awareness. According to official reports such as the ASviS 2023 Report [6], Italians have been late in recognizing the importance of sustainability compared to other countries. The fact that people—linked to sports or not—do not show significant differences compared to the rest of the population in terms of environmental sensitivity may be due to a wider issue which involves the precarious conditions of the younger generations. In Italy, we are facing new generations with a declining demographic weight and experiencing unfavorable economic conditions. This situation has a significant impact on the overall "Weltanschauung" regarding priorities, values, and the perception of the future. This could affect the adoption of sustainable behaviors, also in specific communities such as the sports world.

Educational and cultural dynamics emerge as key elements in understanding the interconnections among sports, the environment, and sustainable behaviors. The current literature [9,23,34] suggests that the educational construct plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions and practices related to sustainability in sports. Sustainability-focused educational programs, integrated into sports contexts, can act as catalysts for increased environmental awareness and more sustainable behaviors. Furthermore, literature analysis emphasizes how the cultural context profoundly influences the perception and implementation of sustainability. Communities that value environmental sustainability as an integral part of their cultural identity are more likely to adopt ecological behaviors. In this context, sports can serve as a cultural vehicle, transmitting sustainable values through sports events, traditions, and shared practices. Similarly, the literature highlights that the connection between sports and the environment can be strengthened through educational initiatives that promote understanding the environmental impact of sports activities [23,34]. These initiatives not only provide detailed information on sustainability but can also shape positive attitudes towards the environment.

This calls for urgent action to promote environmental awareness and education initiatives within Italian sports communities, thus narrowing the gap and promoting sustainable behaviors across the country. It would be helpful to investigate the social dynamics and influences within the sports community that may contribute to this lack of significant deviation.

Furthermore, upon further analysis of the averages on specific issues such as fascism, homophobia, and corruption, an interesting representation of sustainability as one of the dimensions of a more general sense of precariousness and uncertainty for the future was obtained. Alongside concerns about environmental sustainability, similar percentages of concerns have also emerged in the sample about social and economic sustainability dimensions.

The concept of integrated sustainability in each system refers to the definition of health and well-being that was introduced by the WHO in 1948. The WHO's [61] definition links the quality of life to larger, more comprehensive dimensions such as system resilience, social cohesion, participation, and social trust, which were also described by Putnam in 1993 [62].

The analysis considers the potential impact of the "Risk Society" concept formulated by Beck (1986) [63]. This theory helps to understand the data collected, indicating that in contemporary societies characterized by uncertainty and complexity, trust in systems and institutions is the only way to alleviate fears related to environmental, social, and economic dangers. The perception of a greater sense of vulnerability among the young

people interviewed could be interpreted as a manifestation of this scenario. This connection between sustainability and a sense of vulnerability highlights the importance of adopting a holistic approach in future research to fully comprehend the social dynamics at play. Additionally, exploring how public policies and awareness-raising initiatives can concretely address this mistrust and help create a more stable and sustainable vision for the future could be useful. Creating more confident and stable environments could be crucial not only for addressing environmental concerns but also for promoting a more equitable and sustainable society.

5. Conclusions

The results emerging from this research outline a complex scenario of the relationships between environmental knowledge and sustainable behaviors, especially within the university student community and among those who engage in sports. The intrinsic value of the research we have conducted is due to its shedding light on crucial aspects related to sustainability and its impact on well-being. The results we have obtained not only enrich our arsenal of scientific knowledge but also challenge conventional notions of well-being, positioning sustainability at the core of an integrated concept of human prosperity. First and foremost, the conclusions drawn from our research are clear: environmental awareness and sustainable behaviors intertwine in complex ways with the daily habits of university students. The analysis of the data has allowed us to delineate behavioral patterns, highlighting areas where individuals show greater attention to sustainability and those where such attention is still limited. It emerges that "green" activities are more readily adopted when they require simple adjustments in daily lifestyle. This suggests that small changes, if organically integrated into daily routines, can serve as powerful catalysts for more sustainable behaviors. This aspect holds fundamental relevance in defining future strategies to promote sustainability, indicating that the ease of integrating ecological practices into everyday life is crucial for their success. But what does sustainability truly mean in this context? Our research, grounded in established theories and empirical data, provides us with a broader perspective. It is not just about reducing energy consumption or limiting the use of plastic. Sustainability, as revealed by respondents' answers, encompasses a diverse range of behaviors, from attention to water consumption to the choice of sustainable products in clothing and appliances. Furthermore, our research has allowed us to explore the sports context as a potential promoter of pro-environmental behaviors. However, what we have discovered is an intriguing phenomenon of "neutral spillover"—an area where sustainable engagement in sports does not automatically translate into equally sustainable daily habits. This finding emphasizes the need for a holistic approach to sustainability, considering the nuances and complexities of spillovers in specific contexts such as sports.

5.1. Limitations

From a sustainability perspective, the results are promising, but at the same time, there is a need for further investment in education. We have observed a distinct resistance to environmental awareness. Additionally, the data indicate that sustainable practices, such as the use of public transportation or attention to supply chain sustainability, are not yet widely adopted. Promoting the use of public transportation or car-sharing could be beneficial in this regard, as well as raising awareness about the environmental impact of products. It is known that many companies use greenwashing as a marketing strategy but are not genuinely environmentally conscious. A greater focus on the production chain would compel these companies to be more environmentally conscious. Any awareness strategies should be integrated into the sports world, which, as observed, does not significantly deviate in the environmental dimensions we investigated. The results highlighted in the study suggest that further research on this topic could be conducted through web surveys, and the use of scaling techniques is well suited for capturing attitudes towards the environment.

5.2. Future Perspectives

The results obtained from this research outline a complex framework of the relationships between environmental knowledge and sustainable behaviors, especially within the university student community and among those engaged in sports. However, these results represent only the tip of the iceberg, suggesting the need for further in-depth and targeted research for a more comprehensive and articulated understanding. It could be beneficial to explore how public policies and awareness initiatives can concretely address this distrust and contribute to creating a more stable and sustainable vision for the future. The establishment of more trusting and stable environments might be crucial not only for addressing environmental concerns but also for promoting a fairer and more sustainable society overall. Further investigations could offer a more distinct comprehension of the underlying dynamics and aid in developing more precise approaches to encourage sustainability within this community. In this way, the scenario could be further explored through approaches such as qualitative surveys with interviews and focus groups to first understand the respondents' representations of the concept of sustainability. The expansion of sustainable development theories has started to challenge the traditional model's anthropocentric view. It has broadened its focus to include other living beings and future generations and has attributed complexity to the concept of sustainability which unfolds on various interconnected levels, such as environmental, socio-economic, and educational. It would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies to gain a better understanding of perceptions of sustainability and actions over time, identifying trends and changes. Additionally, future research should aim at broadening the contexts of comparison by including other Italian metropolitan cities (from north to south) as well as small towns. This geographical diversification enables various interpretations and perceptions of sustainability based on regional and cultural differences. One hypothesis for further development suggests expanding the survey to young people beyond the university setting, encompassing the entire Generation Z age range. This approach aims at representing a wider range of perspectives and experiences related to sustainability, including those of non-university students, who can contribute significantly to understand sustainable dynamics in society.

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