

TALKING THE WALK OR WALKING THE TALK?

How professional football players could help tackle climate change

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Master thesis on football players as role models for pro-environmental behaviour*

Football is the world's most watched sport, which offers huge potential for mobilising the over five billion football fans worldwide around climate change. However, the sport itself carries a significant carbon footprint: the 2026 World Cup, hosted across three countries, is projected to be the most polluting sporting event on record. Can professional football players, with their enormous reach and status make a difference themselves? And if so, does it work better when a player calls on fans to act more pro-environmentally, or when he leads by example himself? That is what I set out to test in my master's thesis, through an online experimental survey with 379 football fans.

IN SHORT

Who: 379 football fans, mainly from the Netherlands, Norway, Denmark and Italy

How: An online survey using mock Instagram posts from Norwegian football player Morten Thorsby

What was compared: a player calling on fans to act pro-environmentally vs. a player leading by example through pro-environmental behaviour vs. ordinary football content (see Figure 1 on the next page).

Measured: Willingness to act, Second-order beliefs, and Psychological reactance to the message

What did we find?

Leading by example outperforms advocacy.

Fans reacted noticeably less negatively when Thorsby was shown engaging in pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., cycling or donating old football gear himself), compared to when he called on fans to do so without doing it himself.

Evoking less psychological reactance turns out to be an important mechanism for why leading by example works well.

Fans who experienced less reactance were also more willing to act pro-environmentally themselves.

Fans think other fans don't care.

An interesting finding: fans said the climate mattered to them personally, but assumed other fans barely cared. This is known as 'pluralistic ignorance': a mistaken picture of what the group actually thinks, which makes people stay quiet for fear of standing alone, while the majority secretly agrees with them.

Reason for optimism among players.

Resistance to environmental messages was low across the study sample of football fans. Footballers who worry about backlash don't have to be as concerned as often assumed, especially if they pair their pro-environmental message with visible actions of their own.

Footballers don't need to convince fans that the climate matters; most fans might already think so. What they can do is act as role models to show fans they're not alone in that.

A bridge between fields

This research draws on several disciplines: environmental psychology (how social norms shape behaviour), sport management (the role of elite athletes as role models), and climate science (the urgency and context of tackling climate challenges in sport). This combination sits within the broader field of environmental communication, which applies insights from the social sciences to understand and change pro-environmental behaviour.

Supervision and collaboration

The research was carried out at the University of Copenhagen, supervised by Teis Hansen and Adéla Plechatá. The study materials (experimental stimuli) were based on the work of Norwegian international Morten Thorsby and his organisation, WePlayGreen. Using study materials from a real-world player helped with the ecological validity of the study and the practical relevance of the results. I want to express my gratitude for their willingness to collaborate and for the important work they continue to do for the planet within the football industry.

My study included a raffle of football jerseys to incentivise participation in the study. The raffle was made possible by the university's Green Solutions Centre, whose support helped bring in a broad, diverse sample of football fans, which wouldn't have been reached otherwise. Mange tak!

Figure 1.

Example of Mock Social Media Posts from the Survey

Advocacy condition	Leading-by-Example condition	Control condition
		