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To cite this article: Marcelo Moriconi, Patrícia Calca & Carlos Seixas (2025) The Show Can Go On! The Non-existent Effect of Corruption in Fandom (Evidence from Portugal), Public Integrity, 27:1, 1-21, DOI: [10.1080/10999922.2023.2274651](https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2023.2274651)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999922.2023.2274651>



Published online: 30 Oct 2023.



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The Show Can Go On! The Non-existent Effect of Corruption in Fandom (Evidence from Portugal)

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ABSTRACT

One of the key premises of the official sports integrity narrative is that the perception of widespread corruption in sports leads to a decline in people's interest in sports and to the consequent cultural and financial collapse of the sector. With evidence gathered through a representative survey conducted in Portugal, this article proves this premise to be inaccurate. Despite football being commonly perceived as a corrupt industry, the interest of fans remains unalterable regardless of gender, ideology, political preference, age, or place of residence. This article holds relevance in the ongoing discussion about the implications of sports integrity policy-making processes as it shows that maintaining supporters' level of engagement is not significantly impacted by concerns over integrity itself. The conclusion discusses the ethical implications that this situation generates and proposes a series of recommendations to enhance integrity and good sports governance.

KEYWORDS

Football; corruption; tolerance; fandom; integrity

Sports integrity has become fertile ground for scientific research and has even emerged as its own industry (Gardiner et al., 2017; Harvey & McNamee, 2019). Over the past few decades, numerous scandals have revealed various corrupt practices within football, many of which have been institutionalized by the sport's governing bodies. The 2015 FIFA scandal unveiled internal criminal practices and fraudulent relationships with entities ranging from governments to marketing and broadcasting companies (Hölzen & Meier, 2019). That same year, Football Leaks revealed corrupt schemes designed to evade taxes during player transfers. In recent years, the growth and globalization of online sports betting markets have created new structures of opportunity for fraud and corruption (Constandt & Manoli, 2022; Moriconi, 2020). Within this context, match-fixing, a common form of sports corruption, became one of the greatest threats to the sustainability and integrity of the sports industry (Abdiakimovich, 2021; Barkoukis et al., 2020).

Due to the seriousness of the phenomenon and the proliferation of scandals, sports institutions, international organizations, law enforcement agencies, and governments have initiated various initiatives and public policies to combat corruption in sports.¹ In this framework, several authors have emphasized the need for more and better empirical research to assess the unfounded premises underlying the official narrative preventing this issue (Constandt & Manoli, 2022; Spapens, 2021).

One key premise of the official sports integrity narrative is that perceptions of corruption and deviant behaviors in football negatively impact supporters' interest, leading to the cultural and

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

financial downfall of the sector (Feldes, 2013; Gökten & Karatepe, 2015; Interpol & IOC, 2016; Vanwersch et al., 2022).² According to Gökten and Karatepe (2015), match-fixing is a kind of sports corruption that “not only weakens the joy of watching sports competitions for the fans but also causes financial losses for the investors.” However, while the authors present data about the effects of such scandals on football clubs stock prices in Turkey, they fail to provide evidence that the perception or confirmation of the existence of corruption leads to a loss of interest in football. In addition, other studies have shown that fans tend to tolerate integrity violations by sports organizations (Constandt et al., 2020; Vanwersch et al., 2022) and remain attached to the sport despite acknowledging it as a corrupt activity (Hölzen & Meier, 2019; Manoli et al., 2020). Therefore, more empirical studies are needed, as highlighted by Lamberti and Hyatt (2018), who warn about the limited academic production on the nexus between football corruption and its impact on fandom.

Considering the pivotal role this premise play (*the perception of corruption in sport leads to a loss of interest in sport*) its influence on the official pro-integrity narrative (Interpol & IOC, 2016; Moriconi 2018, 2020), and the impact that this idea has on the creation of public policies and new disciplinary codes, it is important to encourage studies that can assess this idea and improve the effectiveness of evidence-based policies.

This article analyses the correlation between fans’ perceptions of corruption in football and their interest in the game. It uses quantitative evidence gathered from a representative survey conducted in Portugal, concluding that the premise of the sports integrity narrative is inaccurate and that the perception of corruption and deviant behavior in football does not affect the interest of football supporters.

Portugal serves as an interesting case study, with one of the world’s top football leagues (ranked between the fifth and the eighth position depending on the ranking)³ and a globally renowned star player: Cristiano Ronaldo. Portugal men’s national team has kept their position in the top 10 best national FIFA teams since 2008, achieving the third place in 2017.⁴ While 93% of Portuguese considers that corruption is widespread in their country (Eurobarometer, 2023), and despite a set of corruption scandal affecting clubs and sports institutions, football continues to be the most popular sport, keeping audience ratings, consumption, and stadium attendance at good levels. Moreover, our study’s findings show that, despite football being widely seen as a corrupt industry by most of the respondents, the interest of fans remains unalterable regardless of gender, ideology, political preference, age, or place of residence.

The findings complement studies on social tolerance of corruption (De Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Gouvêa Maciel, 2021; Shi & Pan, 2018) and contribute to the ongoing debate on the role and types of integrity policies in successful sports management.

The article is divided into five sections. Firstly, we present a literature review on the subject, followed by a historical overview of the Portuguese case. Subsequently, we describe the methodology and research design. The fourth section presents the results, and finally, we discuss our findings and provide recommendations for future research and the improvement of public policy-making processes.

Literature review

During the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, there was a surge in studies on corruption. Numerous studies emerged, explaining its negative consequences for the economy, for democracy, for development, and for society (Gray & Kaufmann, 1998; Heidenheimer & Johnston, 2011; Mauro, 1995). Both the political will to combat corruption and the social intolerance toward it were taken for granted (Arellano-Gault et al., 2022). If there was social or electoral tolerance for corruption, it was due to disinformation. It was believed that with the necessary information, citizens would not vote for corrupt politicians.

Studies on political and economic corruption often started from the premise that corruption was assumed as something negative by the common citizen and that the phenomenon was always morally condemned. This understanding of corruption was that beyond multiple definitions or conceptualizations, corruption was always a bad thing and that there was a social and judicial will to combat it. As Johnston emphasized:

Most transparency proposals, many political-finance reforms, and the emphasis anti-corruption analysts place on a strong civil society and a free press are linked to the notion that an aroused and informed public will demand better performance from government—or at the very least punish the venal and ineffective—and that the ballot box offers the most authoritative way in which they can do so. (Johnston, 2013, p. 503)

However, history showed that this was not the case, as politicians, businessmen, judges, and citizens showed justifications and used moral and pragmatic arguments to defend and accept corruption and deviant practices (see for instance Gannett & Rector, 2015). Inefficient anti-corruption initiatives based on erroneous premises could have harmful consequences for society. They can lead to the collapse of the party system, lead to authoritarian or populist regimes (De Sousa, 2010; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005), lower development and economic growth (Johnston, 2005; Meny, 1992), and promoting a generalized discontent and lack of confidence in democratic institutions (Drapalova et al., 2019). Consequently, several authors started to focus their research on understanding the incentives that lead to social and electoral tolerance of corruption (Colombatto, 2003; De Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Fleming et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Stockemer & Calca, 2013). Corruption can be tolerated (Gouvêa Maciel, 2021), and a bad strategy or anti-corruption policy can do serious damage to politics and democracy.

The narratives surrounding sports integrity, particularly the official discourse for the prevention of match result manipulation (Moriconi, 2018), have followed a similar trajectory. Spapens and Olfers (2015), for instance, emphasized the need for studies that assess the premises upon which policies and initiatives to combat corruption in sports are planned. Sports Governing Bodies have axiomatized the idea that fans will not tolerate corruption or the manipulation of sports competition results (Abeza et al., 2020; Gökten & Karatepe, 2015; Interpol & IOC, 2016), but they haven't expressed the need to empirically verify this idea. This practice has led to concerns raised by Moriconi (2018) about how a limited and biased narrative can distort the fight for integrity. It also determines the perception of a lack of political will or even hypocrisy on the part of sports institutions who present themselves as warriors of integrity (Moriconi & De Cima, 2020).

Despite the key role played by the assumption (that the fans' perception of corruption makes them lose interest in the game) in structuring the internal coherence of the official match-fixing prevention discourse, very few studies have attempted to verify this premise, and the results of existing studies are contradictory and inconclusive.

For instance, Rebeggiani and Rebeggiani (2013) argue that a high perception of manipulation of sports competitions has a negative economic impact. According to the authors, the interest in the competition may decrease, audiences and level of investment may decline, sponsors might withdraw their support, and clubs or entire competitions might collapse.

Buraimo et al. (2016) analyze the fans' behavior in Italy following the Calciopoli affair.⁵ The authors focus on supporters as consumers and contribute to the literature on the economics of corruption, which lacks studies demonstrating the impacts of revealed episodes of corruption on consumers. The authors find that an important number of fans of the punished clubs (Juventus, Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio, Reggina) "were subsequently deterred from supporting their teams inside the stadium" and the home attendances of those teams consequently fell, causing "non-trivial gate revenue reductions" (Buraimo et al., 2016).

According to Amenta and Di Betta (2021), the relegation of Juventus to Serie B resulted in significant financial losses for the Italian football market and caused fans' disaffection.

Despite the authors' findings, it is evident that the popularity of the sanctioned group's most important teams, Milan and Juventus, has remained intact. Juventus continues to be the richest

team in Italy and boasts the largest fan base. They have won 9 of the last 10 championships and won 10 of the last 20 editions of the Italian Cup. Thus, the conclusions by the authors may not look sufficiently robust.

For its part, Milan achieved a championship in the last 11 years and won the Cup in 2011 and 2016. Another sanctioned team, Lazio, has won six Italian Cups since the punishment was imposed.

Other authors have also concluded that fans lose interest in the game when they become aware of match-fixing in their club's competitions, their interest in the game wanes. This situation leads to financial and material losses for sports organizations and championships (Feldes, 2013). However, Kihl et al. (2018) caution that this is the case for organizations with low reputations that are not able to mitigate the damages of such scandals. In the case above, popular Italian clubs possessed accumulated historical cultural capital that has allowed them to successfully rebound.

Lamberti and Hyatt (2018) conducted a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with highly committed football fans to analyze the relationship between football corruption, especially match-fixing, and fandom. The authors found that although two-thirds of the participants were skeptical about the integrity of football, half of them remained unwavering in their fandom. However, participants speculate that if there were continuous perceptions of manipulated results over an extended period, their fandom could diminish.

Moriconi and Teixeira-Diniz (2016) suggest that the perception of a lack of transparency and fair play in Portuguese football is not sufficient motivation for the fans to stop attending the games. The authors use data from Sporting Club of Portugal and their fans while the club was the one with more denouncements of result manipulations against them.⁶ Despite the complaints and perception of corruption surrounding the club, the attendance at their stadium did not significantly change. Whereas in 2003/2004, after two glorious seasons, almost 31,000 spectators attended on average, in 2011/2012 the average attendance was 32,863; in 2012/2013, 25,248; in 2013/2014, 31,669; and in 2014/2015, 32,259. Neither the country's economic crisis, nor the denouncements and perception of manipulation involving the team, suspicions of corruption, nor poor results led to disengagement from the fans.

A recent study by Manoli et al. (2020) also concludes that despite sports being perceived as untrustworthy, "people's propensity to participate, spectate and volunteer in sport remains unchanged." The evidence collected by the authors through focus groups reveals a perceived "normalization of the lack of integrity in sports" and the "belief that sports cannot manage their integrity" and, thus, "cannot be trusted." However, people's engagement with sports "remains unaffected."

Other studies focus on the financial aspects of sports corruption. Dodds (2017) analyses the influence of sports corruption on sponsorship. According to his study, supporters see sports as an activity in which the levels of corruption are high and continue to worsen. Again, the results do not conclusively support the unequivocal negative impact of sports corruption on the entire industry. The author posits that "consumers will support sponsors when the corruption is alleged but are less likely to support the sponsors if the corruption is proven." Furthermore, consumers may support a corrupt sponsor's brand unless the corruptive behavior directly impacts a favorite team, country, or sport.

Lastly, Gökten and Karatepe (2015) focus their analysis on the effects that match-fixing scandals have on the prices of football clubs' stocks traded at the Istanbul Stock Exchange. Their findings suggest that penalties imposed on the involved football clubs resulted in considerable differences in terms of stock prices. While Trabzonspor and Galatasaray's stock prices show positive abnormal returns, the stock prices of Fenerbahçe and Beşiktaş show a more volatile pattern.

Portuguese football: Between fandom, suspicion of corruption, and scandals

Corruption scandals in Portuguese football are not uncommon, as highlighted by previous studies (Melo, 2010; Neves, 1996). The Central Department of Criminal Investigation and Action

(DCIAP in Portuguese) has a dedicated team that investigates corruption crimes in football, working in conjunction with the National Unit to Combat Corruption of the Judicial Police. In 2021 alone, the DCIAP had 50 ongoing investigations related to influence peddling, tax fraud, capital blocking, and competition manipulation (Expresso, 2021). These scandals, such as Operation *Fora de Jogo*,⁷ Operation *Penáti*,⁸ *E-toupeira*,⁹ have involved some of the most powerful and popular clubs: Porto F.C., S.L. Benfica, Sporting C.P.

Corruption allegations are not limited to the football sphere; other sectors of Portuguese society also face accusations and suspicions. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index launched annually by International Transparency, Portugal's ranking has fluctuated between 28 and 33 over the past decade in perceived corruption in the last decade.¹⁰ The institution measures the perception of corruption through a set of expert assessments and opinion surveys. When that perception is measured through the opinion of Portuguese society, the figures increase, and, in fact, the level of perceived corruption is higher than the average of EU countries (Eurobarometer, 2023). In fact, 93% of survey respondents considered that corruption is widespread in Portugal, compared to the average for the EU is 70%. These high perceptions of corruption are something that are somehow stabilized over the time. According to the Eurobarometer (2023), 66% of respondents believed that the level of corruption has increased in the last three years (a 15% increase from 2022), while 25% believed that corruption remained the same.

In this context of corruption perceptions, football stands out as the most popular and widely covered sport in Portugal's media landscape. The television audience rankings are led year after year by football matches¹¹ played by the national team or by the three most popular clubs in the country: Benfica, Porto, and Sporting.

Despite Portugal's population of 10 million people, the country has three sports newspapers primarily dedicated to football, with a particular focus on these three major clubs (Leite, 2019). Together, these three clubs won a staggering 85 of the 87 championships in the history of Portuguese football. Benfica won 37 titles, Porto won 29, and Sporting won 19.

Moreover, these three clubs command the majority of the country's fan base and enjoy political support at both the national and regional levels (Cardoso et al., 2007). According to Gouveia et al. (2020), based on a representative survey conducted in 2013 revealed that the distribution of Portuguese fandom of more than 15 years old is shaped by 44% of Benfica supporters, 25% of Porto, and 25% of Sporting. According to the EPOCA project database (2022), which was conducted in 2020–2021, 53 of those survey present themselves as Benfica supporter, 28% as Porto supporters, and 15% as Sporting. In both cases, more than 90% of Portuguese football fandom is captured by these three clubs.

This fan base includes politicians, businessmen, members of the judicial system, and individuals from various walks of life, including the sports world. It is not uncommon to spot high-ranking officials, celebrities, and even the Prime Minister in stadiums showing their support for their respective teams. This distinctive feature of Portuguese football led to several suppositions and suspicious. For instance, when reporting on an investigation involving Benfica, the *New York Times* describes the institution as “the soccer club as Sovereign State” (Panja, 2020). Judges, prosecutors, and even Portugal's prime minister count themselves as Benfica supporters. But what happens when those fans are allowed to preside over cases that affect the club's interests?

Benfica is not the only club with political influence. Annual dinners are common between the leaders of the three most popular clubs and members of parliamentary groups are common. At a national level, these events exclusively involve the leaders of these three clubs, who exert direct influence on the political agenda (Moriconi & De Cima, 2020). Logically, the budget disparities between these clubs and the others are vast. The hegemony of these three clubs, coupled with a series of scandals in recent years, have consolidated the social imaginary that corruption is rife in football, mainly due to the extreme power of the three big clubs over the others and football

governing bodies. As well as the influence peddling by sports leaders and the susceptibility of sports actors, particularly referees, to bribes.

The integrity of the referees is questioned week after week in the sports media, and some articles have explained the structural constraints that lead the referees to be susceptible to corruption (Moriconi & De Cima, 2021). In 2019, due to allegations of “lack of transparency, the judicial police started an investigation about the way in which the classification and promotion of referees was carried out.”¹² Meanwhile, in 2023, it became known that the Public Prosecutor’s Office is investigating the accounts of some referees for alleged bribes they may have received from Premier League clubs.¹³

Historically, football corruption in Portugal has been linked with refereeing. Pereira (2017, p. 87) verifies that 95% of football corruption scandals in the country involved at least one club manager as an active corruptor and at least one referee as an agent of passive corruption. These facts have led to longstanding suspicions of match manipulation involving referees, creating a major social perception of corruption in refereeing (Moriconi & Teixeira-Diniz, 2016).

The link between corruption and refereeing has a long history, it dates back to November 1990, before a match between Penafiel and Belenenses, referee Francisco Silva was caught receiving a bribe. At that time, corruption only applied to public officials according to the Penal Code. Consequently, Silva wasn’t convicted by the sport’s disciplinary courts. The following year, due to numerous suspicions of corruption in football, the government enacted Law-Decree No. 390/91 of October 10, created specifically to combat corruption in sports.

The first referee convicted of passive sports corruption was José Guímaro, who in 1993 was accused of accepting a bribe offered by the then President of the Leça club (Manuel Rodrigues), to favor the club in a match against Académico de Viseu. The club would consequently win the championship and be promoted to the Second Division. Guímaro and Rodrigues were convicted of passive and active corruption, respectively.

The *Apito Dourado* (Golden Whistle) scandal stands as the biggest corruption scandal in Portuguese football (Melo, 2010). Refereeing played a central role in an institutional influence peddling network that included partial appointments of referees, manipulation of referees’ performance evaluations and classifications, offering of gifts and prostitutes, bribes, etc. There was even institutional pressure and extortion against the Disciplinary Commission to avoid sanctions against players and coaches, or at least reduce them.

Due to the scandal, more than 100 matches were investigated for systematic fixing, leading to the conviction of 13 individuals, although none ended up in prison. Beyond the judicial result, the greatest social impact was the growing suspicions and the institutional loss of prestige of football due to the spread of wiretaps carried out during the investigations and subsequently disseminated on YouTube.¹⁴ The wiretaps were not accepted as evidence due to the way they were obtained, but they served to make the public understand the *modus operandi* and influence peddling that existed, notably between the League, Porto, and the Refereeing Commission to manipulate referee nominations and to defend the interests of some clubs.

The entire football institutional world was tainted by the scandal, leading to a perception that football is corrupt, and the big clubs enjoy impunity through political connections. According to a CMTV (Correio da Manhã TV) report issued in April 2013, and in which unpublished eavesdropping on the *Apito Dourado* case was revealed, “the impunity made corruption vulgar.” Likewise, it is usually assumed that the plot and the way of proceeding continue to exist since many of those implicated in the *Apito Dourado* scandal continue to perform important managerial functions within the world of football (Melo, 2010, p. 12). The study by Moriconi and Teixeira-Diniz (2016) showed that, according to the perception of football fans, 58% of referees would participate in the manipulation of games. The same rate would apply to football managers. However, according to the supporters’ perception, only 27% of footballers would agree to fix a game.

Table 1. Assistance to football stadiums.

Season	Number of teams in <i>Primeira Liga</i>	Stadiums' total capacity	Games' total assistance	Average number of supporters per game
19/20	18	394,723	2,406,355	11,140
17/18	18	384,320	3,654,720	11,943
15/16	18	401,308	3,312,225	10,824
13/14	16	381,976	2,452,212	10,260
11/12	16	372,672	2,633,239	10,971
09/10	16	399,297	2,616,354	10,901
07/08	16	417,703	2,688,541	11,202
05/06	18	434,681	3,239,790	10,587
03/04	18	427,551	2,537,711	10,274

Source: transfermarkt.pt.

<https://www.transfermarkt.pt/primeira-liga/besucherzahlen/pokalwettbewerb/PO1> (Last access January 3, 2022).

Despite those facts, football continued to lead Portuguese television audiences and stadium average attendance remained stable, as can be seen in the last column of [Table 1](#). Moreover, as Surveys have shown that the three biggest clubs maintain their popularity despite ongoing allegations against them (Cardoso et al., 2007; Gouveia et al., 2020).

Currently, football faces another threat: betting-related manipulation. The *Jogo Duplo* (Double Game) investigation in 2020 resulted in five convictions related to match-fixing involving a transnational criminal network. Up to now, it is the only gambling-related match-fixing case that has come to trial. The case involved a transnational criminal network aiming to defraud the betting-market by using national intermediaries with high social capital in football to recruit players from secondary divisions (2nd Division) in precarious situations and playing for clubs without sporting objectives (Cima, 2023).

Given all these factors and historical evidence, Portuguese football becomes a crucial case to examine fan tolerance toward corruption and analyze whether fans' interest in football remains unaffected by underlying corruption in the sport.

Research design and methods

To better understand *if perceptions of corruption in football affect the fans' interest in it*, the article uses novel data collected from a representative survey conducted in Portugal. The survey involved 1020 individuals aged between 18 and 75 and aimed to measure perceptions of institutions, attitudes toward corruption, and actions related to corruption. Fieldwork for the survey took place between December 19, 2020, and April 21, 2021. The sample was stratified by region (NUTSII) and habitat (5 strata), proportional to the resident population in each stratum. The sample is representative of the Portuguese population for the variables of gender, age, education, region, and habitat.

The source for establishing quotas for the sample was the 2011 INE Census. Respondents were selected using the quota method, based on a matrix that crossed the variables such as Sex, Age, Education, Region, and Habitat/Size of population aggregates.

Random sampling points were selected from an initial matrix of, and interviews were conducted based on the established quotas. Although the random route method was not applied in each location, interviewers were instructed to distribute the interviews throughout the location.

Data was collected through direct and personal interviews conducted in respondents' homes, ensuring total privacy. The Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) system was used, and the questionnaire was prepared by the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon (ICS-ULisboa).¹⁵

As our main reasoning points to the inaccuracy of claimed premises of sports integrity as a main condition to drive disinterest in football, for several relevant variables were considered.

As a dependent variable, we consider *changes of interest in football*. Measured as a Likert Scale between one (1) which indicates a *high increase* and five (5) which is a *high decrease* of interest in football. The logic of this variable shows a crescendo of disinterest or decreasing of interest.¹⁶

As our main independent variable, we are going to have two possibilities. First, it is used the respondents' perceptions of corruption in football (*perception of corruption in football*). This is measured on a Likert Scale that ranges from zero (0), meaning *very rare*, to ten (10), which means *very frequent*. In a crescendo logic, these answers are the result of a question where respondents are to assess their perceptions of the corruption levels in football.¹⁷ Second, it is used the respondents' perceptions of change in corruption (*changes of perception of corruption*).¹⁸ Measured as a Likert Scale between one (1) which indicates a high increase and five (5) which is a high decrease in corruption.

In the first possibility, the analysis focused on whether the perception about the status quo of something (in this case the level of corruption) can affect in recent years (2/3 years) the interest in a particular issue (in this case in football), which seems a connection that might happen. Moreover, while the interest in an action can change in recent years, the perception about something does not change easily, according to the concept of mental models from cognitive psychology. The mental model is a simplified subjective mental representation of a real system (e.g., Johnson-Laird, 1983; Legrenzi & Girotto, 1996).¹⁹ It is constructed on the individual's information about the mechanisms of the system, about the elementary chains of cause and effect relating them, and about the reason for the complete system (e.g., De Kleer & Brown, 1983). Moreover, it is based on primary and possibly implied beliefs. Research in cognitive psychology demonstrates that mental models are quite permanent in their main configuration and conclusions, notably when they represent social phenomena (Doyle & Ford, 1998; Dutke, 1994, p. 76; Tetlock, 1989, 1999). When facing signals that opposes their mental models, individuals tend to resolve this cognitive dissonance by assuming that unforeseen and particular occurrences, variations in the unobservable forces, or exterior incentives have led the real system to act in a different way than projected (Cooper & Goren, 2007; Oden, 1987; Tetlock, 1999). In the second possibility, instead of using a variable that measures the status quo, we use a variable that also measures the change. A descriptive statistic of the dependent and independent variables is presented in [Appendix A](#), considering only those who answered the questions.

To test the correlation between these variables, and Ordered probit regression model was used, considering that the dependent variable is an ordered variable.²⁰

Results

The data shows that football is widely perceived as a sector affected by corruption. When asked to associate words with corruption, football emerged as one of the key sectors mentioned.²¹ [Table 2](#) lists the eight most cited words in this open question. For 3% of those surveyed, corruption refers directly to football.

When asked about the frequency of corruption in football, 21.8% of the respondents consider that it is a very frequent phenomenon (10 on a scale of 0–10). On a scale of 0–10, where 0 is infrequent and 10 is very frequent, 62.6% chose values between 8 and 10. In contrast, only a small percentage of those surveyed (2.5%) chose values between 0 and 4 (see [Figure 1](#)).

Regarding the second independent variable, the perception of the changes in corruption, the pattern is slightly different. While the majority of responds (52.8%) believed that corruption had increased (12.2% of the responds considered that there was a high increase in corruption and 40.6% an increase), there is a significant percentage of respondents, 33.3%, that considered that there has not been a change in corruption (see [Figure 2](#)).

Despite this high perception of corruption in football, respondents' interest in that sport did not vary considerably. In fact, while 73.7% of respondents say that in recent years their interest

Table 2. Most cited words—thinking about our country, when you hear about corruption, what words do you associate with this subject?

Word	Frequency	Percentage
Politicians	253	10
To steal	134	5
Money	127	5
Dishonesty	106	4
Thieves	100	4
Brive	95	4
Banks	81	3
Football	75	3

Source: Data project EPOCA.

Q13. The term corruption is recurrent in conversations, but it can mean different things to different people. Thinking about our country, when you hear about corruption, what words do you associate with this subject? Quote up to a maximum of three words.

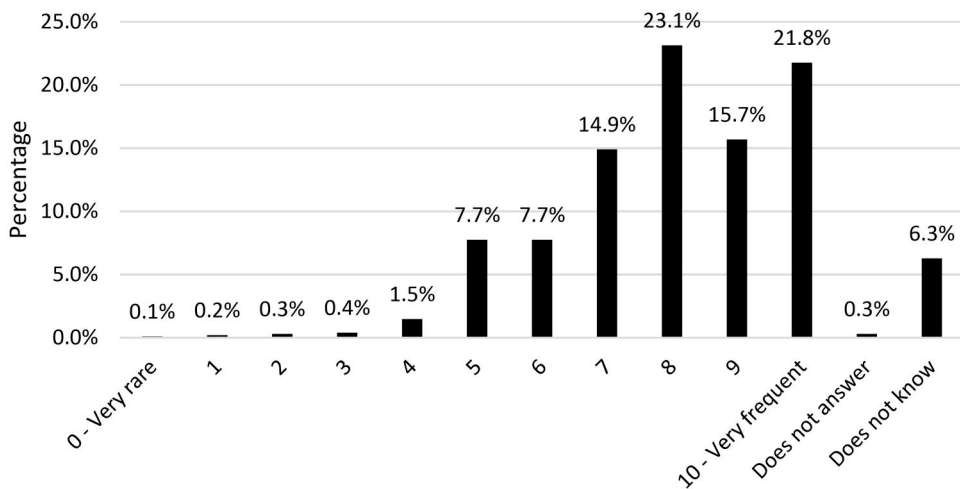


Figure 1. Perception of corruption in football. Regarding the following question: P31. Some people say that corruption in football is very rare, but some say that corruption in football is very frequent. In a scale from 0 to 10, 0 meaning that you think that corruption in football is very rare, and 10 that you think that it is very frequent.

in football has remained stable, 15.5% say that it has increased or increased a lot. Only 7.7% acknowledged a decrease in their interest in football (see [Figure 3](#)).

Although it can be thought that there are respondents who did not have much interest in football and that remained constant, some data indicates that this would not be the situation. Firstly, 69.8% of respondents identified themselves as supporters of a football club (see [Figure 4](#)). Additionally, and despite the clear perceptions of corruption, football continues to be the most popular sport in the country, with the highest television audiences consistently recorded for football games, particularly those involving the national team and the three most popular clubs: Porto, Benfica, and Sporting. Interestingly, these three clubs, while maintaining their popularity and attracting most of followers, are often implicated in alleged cases of corruption, influence peddling, and match-fixing, as reported in the media.

In short, there is some indication that although the corruption is considered to increase by the majority of voters and that football is an activity frequently tainted by corruption, the interest of the public in this sport has not changed.

[Tables 3](#) and [4](#) present the result of the regression for the first and second possibility as the independent variable, respectively. In the five models run, neither *perceptions of corruption in*

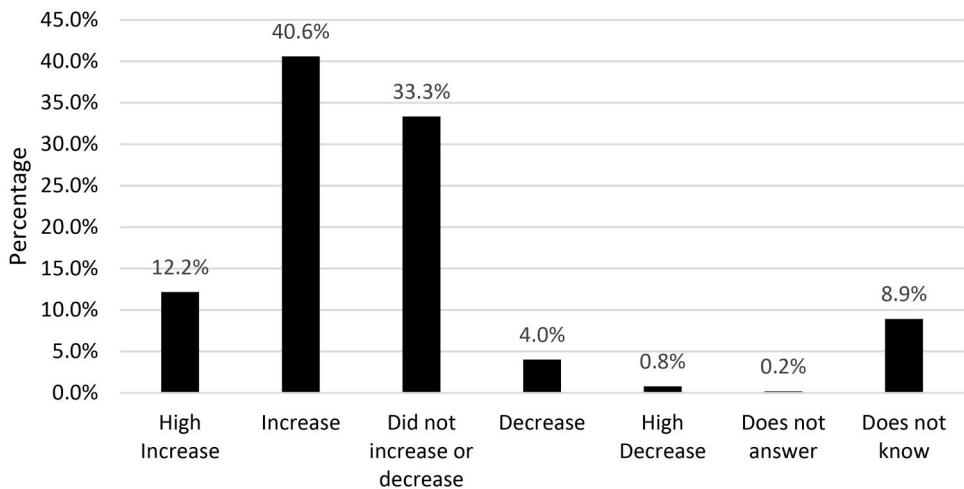


Figure 2. Changes of perception of corruption. Regarding the following question: P17. Talking about corruption in Portugal in recent years, would you say that it has increased a lot, increased, not increased or decreased, decreased or decreased a lot?

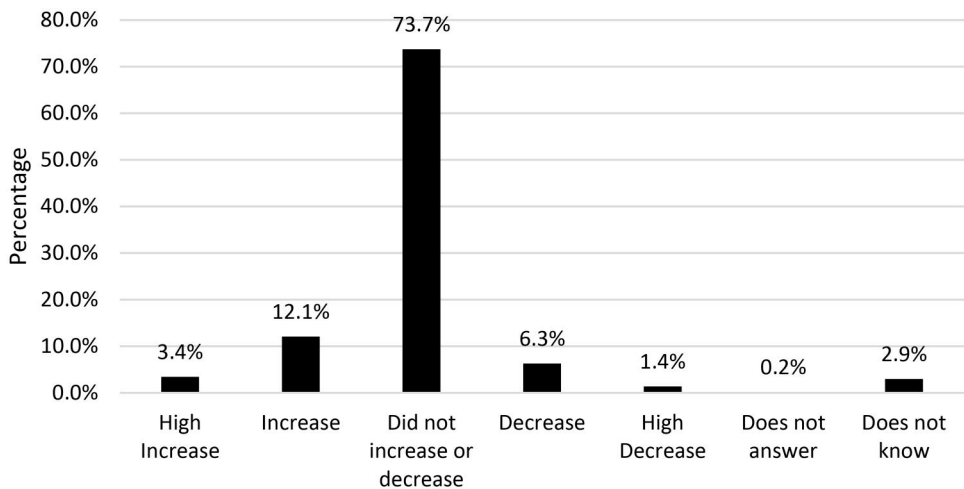


Figure 3. Changes of interest in football. Regarding the following question: P30. In the last years, you would say that your interest in football had a high increase, increased, did not increase or decrease, decreased, or had a high decrease?

football nor *changes of perception of corruption* never significantly influenced changes of interest in football. This is demonstrated even when we control for:

- Sociodemographic characteristics in models 2 to 5, where we include the variables sex (0 if male; 1 if female), education (0—Did not study; 1—Basic education level 1; 2—Basic education level 2; 3—Basic education level 3; 4—High School; 5—Bachelor’s degree/higher education; 7—Graduate/Master/Doctorate), age and region (NUTS II, so 7 regions) were the respondent lives;
- Football club preference in models 3 and 5;²²
- Political orientation in models 4 and 5 (0—Left; 1—Center; 2—Right).

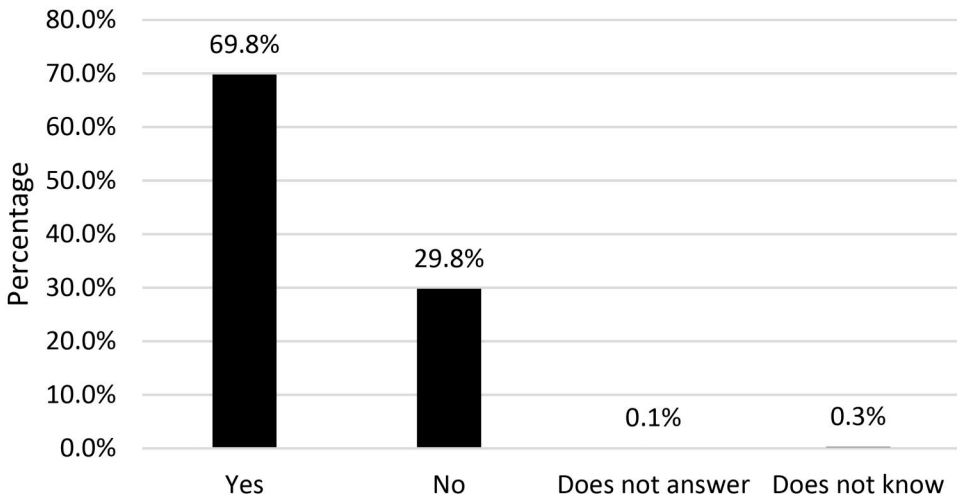


Figure 4. Recognition as a supporter of a football club. Regarding the following question: D29. Is there a football club for which you have more sympathy?

We also take into consideration sociodemographic characteristics as they might influence the perception of corruption or interest in football. Additionally, we consider football club preference since it might be correlated with one's perception of corruption in football, especially considering that football in Portugal is predominantly dominated by the three mentioned clubs. Moreover, this variable allows us to focus only on individuals who have a genuine interest in the sport, as they had to answer a prior question regarding their level of interest.

Finally, we contemplate political orientation, as it may happen that depending on who is in government, perceptions of corruption may change, even if we consider corruption at the football level.

After running the regression, we could show that, despite controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, club preference, and political orientation, respondents do not significantly modify their interest in football in relation to their perceptions of corruption in this sport or *changes of perception of corruption*. Thus, with our data, it does seem that *perceptions of corruption in football or changes of perception of corruption* do not influence *fans' interest in it*. However, it should be noted that due to the fact that most respondents do not change their interest in football (and, in the case of the second independent variable, that there is a significant percentage of respondents who do not change their perception of corruption), this may cause an almost zero correlation between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Nevertheless, that doesn't mean there isn't a true relationship between them. Consequently, we should interpret our results with caution.

Regarding the control variables, the evidence gathered shows a decrease in interest in football among younger participants and males. This finding aligns with previous studies that have shown a decrease, particularly in Generation Z,²³ in the interest in sport (Kuchefski, 2019; Mighton, 2020; Whistle, 2018). This concern has been observed in the soccer industry and has been one of the arguments put forth by Florentino Pérez, president of Real Madrid, in support of his project to create a Super League where the most popular clubs in Europe compete. On the other hand, education or political orientation has an impact on the interest in football.

Regarding geographic variables, supporters from the northern region of the country demonstrate a higher interest in football compared with the other regions. This trend is also observed

Table 3. What is the relation between perceptions of corruption in football and the change of interest in football?

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football
Perceptions of corruption in football	−0.0134 (0.0229)	−0.0118 (0.0233)	−0.0164 (0.0268)	−0.0294 (0.0273)	−0.0235 (0.0315)
Female		0.175** (0.0798)	0.196** (0.0963)	0.145 (0.0950)	0.234** (0.114)
Education		0.0299 (0.0333)	0.00286 (0.0385)	0.0288 (0.0402)	−0.00255 (0.0455)
Age		0.00910*** (0.00291)	0.00717** (0.00342)	0.0102*** (0.00347)	0.00830** (0.00398)
Centro		Norte as base −0.285*** (0.107)		Norte as base −0.246* (0.130)	
Lisboa		−0.362*** (0.104)		−0.323*** (0.122)	
Alentejo		−0.316* (0.175)		−0.283 (0.189)	
Algarve		0.219 (0.213)		0.114 (0.292)	
Açores		0.0654 (0.277)		−0.140 (0.362)	
Madeira		0.0461 (0.257)		0.210 (0.404)	
SLB			SCB as base −0.700* (0.414)		SCB as base −0.946* (0.542)
FCP			−0.579 (0.419)		−0.909* (0.549)
SCP			−0.836** (0.426)		−1.091** (0.555)
VSC			−0.381 (1.328)		−0.520 (1.377)
Center				Left as base −0.120 (0.107)	Left as base −0.191 (0.122)
Right				0.0351 (0.149)	0.0549 (0.168)
Constant cut1	−1.916*** (0.221)	−1.508*** (0.315)	−2.241*** (0.541)	−1.613*** (0.378)	−2.575*** (0.684)
Constant cut2	−1.087*** (0.211)	−0.643* (0.309)	−1.322* (0.535)	−0.818** (0.372)	−1.708** (0.678)
Constant cut3	1.269*** (0.213)	1.768*** (0.314)	0.980* (0.534)	1.585*** (0.376)	0.601 (0.675)
Constant cut4	2.080*** (0.232)	2.581*** (0.327)	1.818*** (0.544)	2.315*** (0.388)	1.346** (0.681)
Observations	935	935	658	672	490

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$.** $p < 0.05$.*** $p < 0.01$.

among fans. Despite being only 0.79% of the sample, those who present themselves as supporters of Sporting Clube de Braga appear to have more interest in football than supporters from the most popular clubs of the country (Benfica, Porto, and Sporting). In recent times, *Sporting Clube de Braga* has meddled between these three clubs and has finished 3rd two times in the last four seasons, has won the cup in 2015/16 and 2020/21 and the league cup in 2012/13 and 2019/20. In 2022, Qatar Sport Investments (QSI) acquired 21.67 of Braga SAD,²⁴ which lead to Braga qualifying for the 2023 UEFA Champions League.

Table 4. What is the relation between changes in perception of corruption and the change of interest in football?

Model	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Variables	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football	Changes of interest in football
Changes in perception of corruption	0.109 (0.0697)	0.105 (0.0677)	0.0911 (0.0591)	0.0846 (0.0581)	0.0621 (0.0665)
Female		0.156* (0.0809)	0.175* (0.0987)	0.147 (0.0960)	0.208* (0.118)
Education		0.0390 (0.0339)	0.00960 (0.0393)	0.0296 (0.0412)	0.0268 (0.0490)
Age		0.00926*** (0.00299)	0.00711** (0.00350)	0.0107*** (0.00354)	0.00984** (0.00413)
		Norte as base		Norte as base	
Centro		−0.324*** (0.110)		−0.238* (0.133)	
Lisboa		−0.319*** (0.106)		−0.262** (0.124)	
Alentejo		−0.288 (0.177)		−0.249 (0.191)	
Algarve		0.140 (0.206)		0.0753 (0.280)	
Açores		0.0842 (0.266)		−0.104 (0.347)	
Madeira		0.00826 (0.272)		0.207 (0.402)	
			SCB as base		SCB as base
SLB			−0.779* (0.465)		−1.325* (0.682)
FCP			−0.676 (0.469)		−1.333* (0.688)
SCP			−0.802* (0.476)		−1.390* (0.692)
VSC			−0.574 (1.341)		−0.997 (1.430)
				Left as base	Left as base
Center				−0.135 (0.109)	−0.216 (0.125)
Right				0.0808 (0.152)	0.122 (0.173)
Constant cut1	−1.483*** (0.136)	−1.027*** (0.276)	−1.946*** (0.555)	−1.121*** (0.333)	−2.617*** (0.772)
Constant cut2	−0.661*** (0.124)	−0.171 (0.272)	−1.017* (0.552)	−0.306 (0.329)	−1.721** (0.770)
Constant cut3	1.710*** (0.134)	2.249*** (0.281)	1.271** (0.552)	2.066*** (0.337)	0.564 (0.766)
Constant cut4	2.493*** (0.161)	3.035*** (0.295)	2.109*** (0.560)	2.781*** (0.349)	1.324* (0.769)
Observations	906	906	626	647	468

Standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$.** $p < 0.05$.*** $p < 0.01$.

Although our database lacks specific data to explain the cause of this situation, it can be inferred that Braga's recent success in football has generated anticipation, enthusiasm, and increased interest on the part of its fans and the citizens of the north of the country.

Something similar is happening with women as well. The data indicates that there is a growing interest in football among females. This echoes the evolving and growing interest in women's football globally. Portugal has developed its own professional league and qualified for the 2023 World Cup for the first time.

Discussion and implications

The data in this study seems to imply that, in the Portuguese case, a high perception of corruption in football does not seem to affect the interest that fans have in the game. The pro-integrity supposition that high levels of perceived corruption led to the economic and social collapse of sports might not be true in this case. However, our results should be read with caution as most respondents do not change their interest in football (and, in the case of the second independent variable, there is a significant percentage of respondents who do not change their perception of corruption) and that can lead to a non-significant correlation when it might exist a true relationship between them.

While this article's conclusions align with those of Manoli et al. (2020), it is worth noting that the previous study aimed to examine whether the perception of corruption influences future behaviors and forecasts. These forecasts should be confirmed through studies like this one which indicates that while the perception of corruption in football is high, the interest in that sport remains unchanged. Therefore, we can conclude that (a) football may be consumed by fans despite its lack of integrity and (b) fans do not seem to demand social changes in terms of integrity to sustain their interest in a particular social sector.

It is crucial to emphasize that this study does not intend to defend the idea that integrity in sports is unimportant or that corruption does not have negative effects on the efficient sport management. On the contrary, it argues that integrity policies at all levels should be grounded in empirical evidence. There is no need to fight against it. Defending a set of policies based on a premise that can be disproven, such as the idea that high levels of perceived corruption erode supporters' interest in the sport, can delegitimize the fight for integrity itself. Furthermore, integrity should be promoted and defended in sports as a core value, rather than merely relying on market considerations like potential audience reduction or economic collapse of competitions, as has often been the case.

Our study does not provide the explanations as to why supporters may not lose interest in football despite perceiving corruption. This limitation suggests that further research is needed to understand whether this tolerance of corruption stems from fans not viewing it as a problem or being unwilling to abandon a football club, team, or part of their family history simply because the current leadership is immoral. The fact that education and political orientation do not play a role in the change in interest in football may reinforce this last idea.

However, the literature has provided some explanations for these reasons. As Manoli et al. (2020) state, a vicious circle is created in which a sport perceived as corrupt continues to be consumed and supported by its fans, leading to no societal demand for improving internal governance and integrity within that sport. Pereira (2017) has shown that most match-fixing scandals in Portugal involve at least one club manager as an active corruptor and at least one referee as an agent of passive corruption. The lack of strong incentives for football governing bodies to protect integrity might be a huge problem in the country.

For Manoli et al. (2020), the paradox of perceiving a sport as corrupt, but keeping an interest in participating in it, is related to the fact that the high perception of corruption does not refer only to sports. It is a phenomenon that affects all social spheres. In our survey, participants indicated that 69% of politicians and 51% of businessmen were perceived as corrupt. Additionally, 53% of the participants believed that corruption increased in the last year.

Therefore, given that "everything is corrupt," fans resort to a moral license that allows them to continue enjoying the expected social results of sports despite the lack of integrity in the sector. In this sense, perceived corruption in sports does not prevent participants from socializing, having fun, making friends, or having a group they belong to, as Manoli et al. (2020) have also shown. Sports continue to deliver positive outcomes for consumers, regardless of whether they are corrupt or not. This holds true even independent of education or political orientation.

In the case of Portuguese football, engagement with the sport goes beyond mere sporting integrity. In the Portuguese case, this is very important because the three most important clubs, that have historically won the championship, have also represented most of the supporters. While these three clubs are the ones who have social, political, and economic capital to influence all social spheres, they are also the ones who are recurrently affected by suspicions and denouncements of corruption and manipulation of sports competitions. In this sense, new work should be carried out to understand how fans understand widespread corruption in the world of football or even if they tolerate corruption because they feel that there is nothing to do about it without inflicting damage on the sport they love. The expected social outcomes that they achieve through their engagement with this sport are probably not affected. In some cases, they could even be enhanced, considering that in this context, the most popular clubs repeat titles with a frequency that is difficult to find in other championships. In this sense, it is interesting to observe that fans from *Sporting Clube de Braga*, which has achieved good results in the last years and has qualified for international competitions, have increased their interest in football compared with the support of the three most important clubs. Considering that the Portuguese championship has historically been characterized as a competition dominated by the three most popular clubs, Braga's case could confirm that improved competitiveness generates a higher rate of fan interest.

This situation also raises a warning. The historical characteristics of the Portuguese League, while seeming to gain the interest of domestic fans, have been an obstacle to promote and market Portuguese football abroad (Menezes, 2021). Although the internationalization of the championship is a strategic point of the Portuguese League for the 5-year period 2023–2027, the championship continues to lose interest and, before the start of the 2023–2024 season, channels from Brazil, France, and England announced that they will no longer broadcast the Portuguese League in their countries.²⁵ At the same time, Cristiano Ronaldo's transfer to Arabia and Messi's decision to continue his career in MLS have created new international competitors in the Portuguese league.

Despite the limitations, our study is innovative in the way it addresses an important and empirically poorly studied topic, such as the relationship between the perception of corruption, particularly in football, and the interest of supporters. Although the results should be read with caution, they indicate that the premise that a high perception of corruption in football negatively affects the interest of the public is, in the case studied, false. And this may be important considering how significant is that policies are promoted based on correct diagnoses and proven premises. Given that situation, football would be more than an end, it would be a means to an end: symbolic values such as identity, integration, health, group membership, emotions, etc., not be affected by the lack of integrity in the sport.

Logically, in this ecosystem, socialization through football may include a social learning process that includes the tolerance of corruption, or at least the digestion of immoral and criminal practices that occur in an environment that is only possible thanks to the social support received from supporters. Without fans, there is no football. Without fans who tolerate corruption, there is no corrupt football. Therefore, Portuguese football may face what Moriconi (2009) has called the logic of the victim-accomplice: sources of unrest that affect individuals are allowed to continue over time due to the tolerance, by action or omission, of the victims of those conflict hot-spots. Although in this case, the followers achieve the social goals they seek, the negative effects that the institutionalization of corruption has on democracy and social coexistence are also known. Though fans can achieve the goals they seek through football, the discontent with democracy, its institutions, and fundamentally its results at the economic level and on the promotion of a decent life are known in Portugal and are well registered in the results of our survey. In this sense, the tolerance of corruption in football would act in accordance with the third dimension of power in Steven Lukes' triad, which is through ideological power. According to the author, ideological power allows individuals or institutions to influence people's wishes and thoughts, even

making them want things that should be opposed to their own self-interest (Lukes, 2005), and in our case, despite the level of education or political orientation.

However, although there would be no social pressure on the part of the followers to demand the prudence and integrity of football, it is also true that in Portugal, as we show, new generations have less interest in football, which is in line with Mighton (2020) and Whistle (2018) concerning traditional sports. New practices such as *eSports* are becoming a bigger part of the entertainment business (Brown et al., 2018). In this sense, new studies should delve into the relationship between the reputation of corruption in football and other traditional sports, and the loss of interest on the part of the new generations.

Finally, it should be remembered that the prestige of sport is, to a large extent, based on the good values it preaches and inculcates and the wide spectrum of social goals that can be addressed through it (Corvino et al., 2023). In this sense, if sport gains a reputation as an area around which corrupt practices and social tolerance of corruption are structured, the positive values of sport could be affected or jeopardized. Therefore, promoting sports integrity should be an obligation rather than solely focusing on potential economic threats.

Notes

1. An important day for the fight against corruption in Sport is September 1, 2019, when the Council of Europe Convention on the Manipulation of Sports Competitions entered into force. The so-called Macolin Convention has been considered the most effective political initiative for combating the problem as it calls for cooperation among all the relevant stakeholders and establishing a set of practical and political recommendations for the creation and promotion of institutional, legal and criminal structures to combat the scourge.
2. See also SportAccord, "Match-fixing: what are the dangers," video accessible online. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23BdVV8Ow6o&list=PLIEubhMUJZnJvJ6_rbE_GT_BIDrwMeNnV3&index=4), last access 14/10/2023.
3. See for instance, Team Form (<https://www.teamform.com/en/league-ranking/world>); Global Football rankings (<https://www.globalfootballrankings.com/>) or Sport Unfold (<https://www.sportsunfold.com/best-football-leagues-which-are-statistically-ranking-in-the-world/>).
4. See FIFA Ranking: <https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/POR> Last access 14/10/2023.
5. Calciopoli was a match-fixing scandal revealed in 2006 that affected the Italian top professional football leagues, Serie A and B. The affair was uncovered when several telephone recordings showed questionable relations and conflict of interest among team managers, football governing bodies and the refereeing council. The investigation discovered a corrupted election and appointment of referees.
6. At the time of the study, Sporting Club of Portugal was one of the clubs that most emphatically denounced results manipulation campaigns against them. In March 2014, the then president, Bruno de Carvalho, had launched a campaign to "say enough" because, according to him, his club had been systematically harmed by arbitrations in recent years.
7. A case related to suspected crimes of qualified tax fraud, social security fraud and money laundering, linked to the conclusion or renewal of sports labour contracts, payment of commissions and financial circuits involving intermediaries in these deals, as well as the use of image rights. See: <https://www.ojogo.pt/futebol/noticias/buscas-a-benfica-fc-porto-e-sporting-suspeitas-de-fraudes-que-ascendem-a-58-milhoes-16370725.html> (Last access 14/10/2023).
8. Related with irregularities and frauds in the transfer markers. See <https://www.publico.pt/2023/05/17/sociedade/noticia/autoridade-tributaria-faz-buscas-estadios-benfica-fc-porto-sporting-2049989> (Last access 15/10/2023).
9. See <https://www.dn.pt/sociedade/e-toupeira-tribunal-aponta-determinacao-criminosa-para-condenar-paulo-goncalves-por-corrupcao-15888136.html> (Last access 15/10/2023).
10. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021>. That Index is one of the most used in social scientific research.
11. <https://www.dinheirovivo.pt/iniciativas/futebol-domina-top-de-programas-mais-vistos-desde-o-inicio-do-ano-13826317.html> (Last access 15/10/2023).
12. See <https://desporto.sapo.pt/futebol/primeira-liga/artigos/pj-investiga-classificacoes-dos-arbitros-da-primeira-liga-de-futebol> (Last access 14/10/2023).
13. See for instance <https://desporto.sapo.pt/atualidade/artigos/antigo-arbitro-hugo-miguel-na-lista-de-suspeitos-investigados-por-alegados-subornos-do-benfica> (Last access 15/10/2023).

14. See for example https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=escutas+apito+dourado (Last access 15/10/2023).
15. Project EPOCA, funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), and coordinated by Professors Luís de Sousa and Pedro Magalhães.
16. This variable corresponds to the question number 30. It goes as: *Nos últimos anos, diria que o seu interesse por futebol tem aumentado muito, aumentado, nem aumentou nem diminuiu, diminuiu ou diminuiu muito?* Translation: *In recent years, would you say that his interest in football has increased a lot, increased, neither increased nor decreased, decreased or decreased a lot?*
17. This is question number 31 of the survey, and it is stated as follows: *Há quem diga que em Portugal a corrupção no futebol é muito rara, mas também quem diga que é muito frequente. Numa escala de 0 a 10, em que 0 significa que acha que a corrupção no futebol é muito rara, e 10 que acha que é muito frequente.* Translation: *There are those who say that in Portugal corruption in football is very rare, but also those who say that it is very frequent. On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you think corruption in football is very rare, and 10 you think it's too frequent.*
18. This variable corresponds to the question number 17. It goes as: *Falando sobre a corrupção em Portugal nos últimos anos, diria que aumentou muito, aumentou, não aumentou nem diminuiu, diminuiu ou diminuiu muito?* Translation: *Talking about corruption in Portugal in recent years, would you say that it has increased a lot, increased, not increased or decreased, decreased or decreased a lot?*
19. Terms like cognitive maps, folks' theory or naive theory refer to the same basic concept (e.g., Dutke, 1994, p. 12).
20. An ordered logistic regression model leads to the same results.
21. For this reason, the survey dedicated some questions concerning corruption and football that were not made to other sectors.
22. We have dropped the variable regions when we introduce the club preferences as they are related.
23. Generation Z (or Gen Z) is the demographic cohort represented people born between mid to late 1990s as and the 2010s. Gen Z succeed Millennials and precede Generation Alpha.
24. Initials of Sociedade Anónima Desportiva, Public limited Sport Company in Portuguese. See: <https://www.ojogo.pt/futebol/1a-liga/braga/noticias/consumada-a-entrada-da-qatar-sports-investments-na-sad-do-braga-15480051.html> (Last access 14/10/2023).
25. See for instance <https://jornalonline.pt/primeira-liga-nao-tem-interesse-para-canais-de-televisao-estrangeiros/> (Last access 14/10/2023).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank all the EPOCA project team, especially Luís de Sousa, Felipe Clemente, and Pedro Magalhães, for their helpful comments and input during the preparation of the article. Our sincere gratitude to them, to the FCT for funding EPOCA, and to the reviewers who gave us suggestions that have certainly improved this article.

Ethical approval

The authors have conducted their research in accordance with principles detailed by professional associations and treaties other than the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki such as the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Code of Ethics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This publication was financed by national funds through the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) under the auspices of the research project EPOCA: *Corrupção e crise económica, uma combinação perigosa: compreender as interações processo-resultado na explicação do apoio à democracia* (Ref.: PTDC/CPO-CPO/28316/2017). Marcelo Moriconi work was also supported with funding from the strategic programme of the Centro de Estudos Internacionais, Iscte-Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (with the reference FCT UID/CPO/03122/2019 and UIDB/03122/2020).

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Appendix A

Table A1. Descriptive statistics.

	Changes of interest in football	Perception of corruption in football	Changes of perception of corruption
<i>N</i>	988	953	927
Mean	2.9	7.93	2.34
Standard Deviation	0.61	1.72	0.8
Median	3	8	2
Mode	3	8	2