Sustainability- or environmental-related companies, such as waste management, energy, and supply chain companies, are an emerging sport sponsorship category (i.e., green sponsorship category). However, sometimes sustainability initiatives are seen as political, and marketers may hesitate to secure these sponsors, despite the financial benefits.

For the sponsor, the benefit of consumer awareness as a cognitive response is the initial stage of the consumption process and fundamental benefit (Kim, Lee, Magnusen, & Kim, 2015). Personal attributes may influence an individual’s response to sponsorship; in this case, if someone views themselves as an environmentalist, this may play a role in noticing green sponsorships. Cianfrone and Kellison (2018) provided an initial examination of this relationship utilizing NFL consumers. Further exploration of this phenomenon in different sports or segments of consumers would help justify this sponsorship category for both the sponsoring and sport organizations (Kellison & Hong, 2015; Kellison & Kim, 2014). The purpose of this study is to examine Major League Soccer consumers’ cognitive response to green category sponsors compared with non-green category, while determining if personal environmental disposition is influential. We partnered with a MLS team to survey season ticket holders’ awareness/cognition of official team sponsors—three green sponsors (energy/recycling partners) and four non-green sponsors (airline, beverage, etc.). Participants were prompted to identify the team sponsors (“yes”, “no”, “not sure”) from a list of 20 companies (13 dummy, 7 actual). We examined a participant’s personal environmental disposition with a single original item (“I consider myself an active/passive/not environmentalist”). Respondents (N = 996) were largely male (84%), white (non-Latino; 79.1%), between 25-44 years old (76.7%), and college educated (79%). Overall, participants correctly identified the sponsors (M > 50%). The highest recognized sponsor was a non-green category brand with 97% of participants identifying the company as a sponsor. Other sponsors followed as 82% (non-green), 70% (non-green), 62% (green), 56% (non-green), 39% (green), and 24% (green). T-tests revealed the green category sponsors were recognized significantly less (p < .001; 38%) than non-green category sponsors (76%). Brand confusion was evident for the official energy company, as it was recognized at 39% and competing company at 42%. The participants self-identified as passive environmentalists (54.5%), followed by not environmentalists (29.4%), and active environmentalists (14.1%). Interestingly, non-environmentalists had the highest recognition of green category sponsors (44%) and environmentalists had the highest recognition of non-green category sponsors (53%), yet the differences were minimal. Through MANCOVA, we found no significant effect of environmental disposition on sponsorship awareness [F(6, 1982) = 1.344; p = .235; Λ = .992; partial η2 = .004]. We found green category sponsorships to be recognized slightly less than non-green category sponsors.

However, more than half of respondents recognized one green sponsor, showing promise. The highest recognized brand was the jersey sponsor, which likely influenced the strong response. The lack of significant differences in brand awareness levels among participants based on their personal environmental dispositions should breed confidence in sport marketers and sponsors that awareness extends beyond those who view themselves as environmentalists.