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Sport identification, moral perceptions and collective action: A study with young football players

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Abstract

We conducted a cross-sectional study investigating whether sport identification predicts different forms of collective action intentions aimed to redress the unfavourable condition faced by disadvantaged individuals. In doing so, moral perceptions (moral convictions, moral violation and moral obligation) were tested as mediators. Participants were young football players from the grassroots of a professional Italian club ($N = 111$). Results revealed that sport identification was indirectly associated with greater willingness to engage in both normative and non-normative solidarity-based collective action via stronger moral obligation perceptions; moral convictions mediated the relationship between sport identification and normative collective action, while no mediation effects emerged for moral violation. We discuss findings in relation to collective action and sport research.

KEYWORDS
collective action, moral obligation, morality, social identity, sport

1 | INTRODUCTION

Research has highlighted the central role that social identity plays in predicting collective action (Thomas, Mavor, & McGarty, 2012; Van Zomeren, Kutlaca, & Turner-Zwinkels, 2018). To fully understand predictors of collective action aimed at favouring social equality by improving the position of disadvantaged groups, the focus has been both on disadvantaged groups, who may strive to improve their status, and on advantaged groups, who possess higher status and power and may contribute to effectively change status relations (Radke, Kutlaca, Siem, Wright, & Becker, 2020). Scholars have however concentrated on understanding the roles of advantaged and disadvantaged groups directly embedded in the status hierarchy under examination (i.e., they have examined predictors of collective action amongst advantaged and disadvantaged ethnic groups on the same status hierarchy, such as White and Black people in relation to Black people's rights). In this study, we adopt a different perspective, investigating the extent to which identifying with a sport social group, as a positive social identity with salient values of equality and social inclusion, motivates individuals to engage in collective action favouring disadvantaged group members.[1]

Additionally, research on collective action has placed attention on morality constructs, such as morality convictions and violations (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2012), as mechanisms allowing collective action. However, research has rarely considered the predictive power of different forms of morality simultaneously. This is important as it can shed light on the more pertinent morality component when considering the path to collective action. In this study, drawing on recent theorizing (Sabucedo, Dono, Alzate, & Seoane, 2018; Van Zomeren et al., 2018), we consider three conceptually distinct types of morality perceptions, that is morality convictions, violation and obligation, evaluating them as mediators of the path from social identity to collective action.

Finally, while research has mainly concentrated on examining predictors of normative collective action, we exploratively investigate the associations of social identity and morality constructs with both normative and non-normative collective action (i.e., radical forms of actions often based on the use of violence). This will enhance our understanding of factors that may be relevant to the far less explored field of non-normative collective action.

We conducted a correlational study amongst young players from the grassroots of a professional football club in Italy. Results contribute theoretical knowledge on the relevant social identities and underlying processes driving different forms of collective action. Furthermore, the study provides applied considerations by defining a social identity that can be instrumentally used to promote a more equal society.

2 | SOCIAL IDENTITY AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

According to the social identity model of collective action (SIMCA; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008), identification with a relevant social group, together with perceptions of group-based injustice and efficacy beliefs, are key predictors of intentions to engage in collective action. The importance of social identity for collective action is also at the core of other collective action models. For instance, the encapsulation model of the social identity of collective action (Thomas et al., 2012) posits that social identity can work as a proximal predictor of collective action. The political solidarity model of social change (Subašić, Reynolds, & Turner, 2008) states that advantaged group members can adopt a shared identity with the disadvantaged group that excludes an illegitimate authority and engage together in actions to restore social equality.

These models have their roots in social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (SCT; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which place importance on social identity as central to intergroup behaviour. According to SIT, individuals from disadvantaged groups are likely to engage in collective action when group boundaries are impermeable and status differences are perceived as illegitimate and unstable. Predictions are less clear for advantaged group members, who may decide to favour the disadvantaged outgroup and engage in collective action when their moral image is threatened because of the unfair status situation. SCT also places importance on group identity and norms as the determinant of behaviour: when individuals are depersonalised

(i.e., when their social identity is salient), they self-define in terms of the attributes defining the social group and adopt the social norms that characterise such identity (Turner et al., 1987). It follows that, if a social identity is defined by values of acceptance and respect, and therefore the moral principle is to support disadvantaged individuals or groups, perceiving the intergroup situation as unjust can motivate advantaged group members to act in support of the disadvantaged group (cf., Di Bernardo et al., 2021).

There is large empirical evidence supporting the key role of social identification in driving collective action. Social identification has been shown to foster collective action in favour of one's own group amongst both disadvantaged (Simon & Klandermans, 2001) and advantaged group members (Bagci & Turnuklu, 2019). But social identification can also foster solidarity-based collective action amongst advantaged group members. There is evidence that in some cases identification with a superordinate group, or perceiving advantaged and disadvantaged group members as belonging to a common group, can motivate collective action amongst members of the advantaged group (Bikmen & Sunar, 2013; Cocco, Di Bernardo, Stathi, & Vezzali, 2022; Stürmer & Simon, 2004; Van Zomeren et al., 2018).

2.1 | The value of a sport identity

In the present study we explore the usefulness of sport identity as a type of social identity potentially able to mobilize collective action. Group identification can help young people reduce uncertainties and favour their well-being (Abrams & Rutland, 2008; Rutland & Killen, 2015). A sport identity can be especially beneficial: sport teams allow personal contact and intimacy with peers as well as a sense of group membership (Allen, 2003).

A sport identity is usually superordinate and characterised by values such as social inclusion, respect, fairness, equality and provides the ground for educating young people to responsible citizenship (UNESCO, 2021). In line with SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), SCT (Turner et al., 1987) and the developmental intergroup perspective, which emphasises group processes across development (Abrams, Powell, Palmer, & Van de Vyver, 2017; Bigler & Liben, 2007), we can speculate that individuals highly identified with a sport social group will commit to its values and adopt a normative-consistent behaviour. Indeed, to the extent that individuals' social identity is characterised by values of (for instance) social inclusion and respect, they should commit to think, feel and act consistently with them (Turner et al., 1987). Sport values are inconsistent with observing injustice against groups (e.g., lower rights attributed to people from disadvantaged groups) and failing to act to address such injustice. Therefore, to the extent that individuals are committed to a relevant sport identity characterised by values linked to justice and fairness, they are expected to act consistently, addressing such injustice whenever they are aware of it and have the chance of behave against it. In other words, we anticipate that youth participants displaying a higher identification with their sport social group will be more inclined to act in support of marginalized individuals, that is individuals from disadvantaged groups.

Research examining the effects of sport identification on moral development and behaviour amongst youth is scarce, and largely focused on prosocial or antisocial behaviour within the sport context (Bruner et al., 2018). We aim to provide first evidence that a sport identity can have beneficial effects that go beyond the sport context, and specifically that sport identification will be associated with willingness to support disadvantaged groups by engaging in collective action. Importantly, we predict an indirect effect between sport identification and collective action, via morality perceptions.

3 | MORALITY PERCEPTIONS AS MEDIATORS

The initial formulation of SIMCA was later extended to include morality perceptions as an additional predictor of collective action, allowing a better understanding of why people engage in collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2012). Specifically, Van Zomeren et al. (2012) introduced the construct of moral convictions, that is, 'strong and absolute

stances on moral issues' (p. 52), which allows to connect people to higher-order principles on moral issues, requiring adherence to these principles. They argued that morality considerations about what is right and what is wrong are intertwined with group identity in predicting collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2018). When a meaningful social identity is salient, moral beliefs associated with this identity can serve as a motivational guide to action (Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005).

Van Zomeren et al. (2018) also argued that an operationalization of moral perceptions only in terms of moral convictions may be too restrictive to capture the broad array of moral motivations that can drive collective action. Individuals may be especially sensitive to violations of their moral convictions, which may lead to attempts to protect them (Skitka, 2010). Therefore, moral violation may be an especially strong trigger for collective action, since violation of moral values can increase social identity salience (and therefore, conformity to this identity and its norms). When this happens, individuals are likely to be motivated to protect identity relevant values under threat (Van Zomeren et al., 2018; see also Radke et al., 2020). Research has consistently shown that moral violation can lead to increased collective action, also in its more radical, non-normative forms (Pauls, Shuman, Van Zomeren, Saguy, & Halperin, 2022).

We consider a third type of moral perceptions, that is moral obligation, defined as 'a motivational force toward a certain action that later could end in a decision to execute a behavior' (Sabucedo et al., 2018, p. 2). One characteristic of moral obligation is that it induces a sense of commitment; failing to behave consistently with one's perceived duties would create a discrepancy between beliefs and behaviour, resulting in cognitive distress (Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1987). In addition, people who feel moral obligation may also be concerned with personal sacrifice, prioritizing obligations over personal costs (Sabucedo et al., 2018). Sabucedo et al. (2018) showed in three studies that moral obligation was a better predictor of both normative and non-normative collective action than moral convictions, and that its effects held over and above other variables related to collective action, such as group identification (for additional evidence, see Ayanian et al., 2021; Milesi & Alberici, 2018).

Our prediction is that sport identification will be associated with increased perceptions of the three types of morality constructs considered (moral convictions, violation, obligation) and, in turn, greater collective action. As explained above, research has already provided evidence for the association between these morality constructs and collective action. To justify the association between sport identification and morality perceptions, we refer to the importance of the congruence between social identity content and behaviour. Research on collective action has found that attributes defining the group are an important part of the ingroup identity, motivating collective action (Reicher, Cassidy, Wopert, Hopkins, & Levine, 2006). We argue that the values characterising sport identity relate to moral considerations relevant to collective action. The sport identity refers to a superordinate category imbued with positive values, such as acceptance and respect for equality, and characterised by prosocial norms, such as helping and supporting disadvantaged individuals to enhance social inclusion (UNESCO, 2021). Therefore, individuals highly identified with a social group characterised by these values are more likely to consider social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals a relevant moral issue, be sensitive about its violation, and feel obligated to defend it. Since values and social norms characterising the ingroup category determine what individuals perceive as fair and appropriate behaviour (Turner et al., 1987), being highly identified with a social category that values respect for and social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals should be associated with moral perceptions consistent with these values.

4 | THE PRESENT RESEARCH

We conducted a study to investigate whether sport identification would be associated with collective action, while exploring the mediating role of distinct types of moral perceptions (moral convictions, violation, obligation). We included two types of collective action (normative and non-normative) to allow a better understanding of factors that may be pertinent to both. Participants were young football players from the grassroots of a professional club located in Northern Italy.

We decided to focus on young people because, as explained in the introduction, sport identity is key for youth development. We also argue that engaging with sports can have educational and societal functions, and we aim to examine whether these functions are influential beyond the immediate sport context. This study will therefore allow us to illuminate the role of sport identity on moral perceptions, with specific reference to collective action in support of disadvantaged groups.

We focused on young football players from a professional club because we reasoned that, given widespread popularity and relevance of football in Italy and the competitiveness of being selected to play in the grassroots of a professional football team, sport identity would be especially distinctive and salient to our participants.

As dependent variables, we included measures of both normative and non-normative collection. There is ample research on factors associated with normative collective action. Considering that empirical findings regarding morality perceptions and non-normative collective action are mixed, with some studies showing effects of morality perceptions only on normative collective action (e.g., Cocco et al., 2022) and others on both collective action forms (e.g., Pauls et al., 2022), we do not make a-priori predictions.

As explained earlier, we predict that group identification with a sport social group will be indirectly associated with greater collective action intentions, via stronger moral convictions, moral violation and moral obligation. Considering that all three types of morality perceptions have been individually associated with collective action, we expect that they will all be relevant mediators. However, given the lack of prior research simultaneously testing all three morality factors, we do not make hypotheses for differential mediating effects.

5 | METHOD

5.1 | Participants and procedure

Participants were 111 male football players from the grassroots of a professional football club from a Northern Italian region, playing in the Italian third league (Serie C). Ages ranged from 9 to 18 years ($M_{age} = 13.17$ years, $SD = 2.41$). Participants were provided with a link to the online questionnaire by trained research assistants. Before their training session, they completed the questionnaire individually on their mobile phone, while research assistants remained present to answer eventual questions, for instance on the meaning of some words or items. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed.

5.2 | Measures

All measures used a five-step scale (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*).

Participants were told that with the term 'disadvantaged individuals' in this study we referred to people from a broad range of backgrounds who suffered of social disadvantage, such as individuals with disability, with foreign origins and so forth.

5.2.1 | Sport identification

To assess participants' identification with their sport social group, we used three items adapted from Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, and Manstead (1998): 'I see myself as a member of the group of sportsmen'; 'Being a member of the group of sportsmen occurs naturally to me'; 'I identify with members of the group of sportsmen.' Items were combined in a reliable index of identification (alpha = .75).

5.2.2 | Morality perceptions

We used nine items, three for each morality dimension. To assess moral convictions we used three items adapted from Van Zomeren et al. (2012): 'My opinion on the importance of the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals' was followed by the items: 'is an important part of my moral norms and values'; 'reflects an important part of who I am'; 'is based on (is strictly associated with) moral convictions which everybody should respect.' Since excluding items did not lead to an increase in reliability (alpha = .53), we merged the three items; however, considering the low reliability of this measure, caution should be used in interpreting results. Moral violation was assessed with the following items adapted from Van Zomeren et al. (2018): 'What I believe is violated when I see disadvantaged persons who are excluded and/or oppressed'; 'My moral principles are violated when I realize that unfair actions against disadvantaged individuals are used'; 'I perceive the social exclusion of disadvantaged individuals as a violation of the moral principles in which I believe' (alpha = .80). Finally, the following three items (adapted from Sabucedo et al., 2018; Vilas & Sabucedo, 2012) were used to assess moral obligation: 'I feel morally forced to take part into protest acts against social exclusion of disadvantaged individuals'; 'I feel the moral obligation to defend the rights of disadvantaged individuals with respect to social exclusion'; 'I feel morally obligated to take part into protest acts that favour the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals' (alpha = .86). Given that reliabilities for the latter two constructs were satisfactory, we created two indices of moral violation and obligation by merging respective items.

5.2.3 | Collective action

Three items, adapted from larger collective action literature (e.g., Reimer et al., 2017; Van Zomeren et al., 2012), assessed willingness to engage in normative collective action to support disadvantaged individuals: 'Would you sign a petition to defend the rights of disadvantaged individuals?'; 'Would you vote for somebody who wants to contrast the oppression of disadvantaged individuals?'; 'Would you participate to a legal demonstration to defend the rights of disadvantaged individuals?'. Excluding the second item increased the reliability of the measure (alpha increased from .58 to .70), therefore we combined the first and the third item to obtain an index of normative collective action. Three items adapted from Corcoran, Pettinicchio, and Young (2015) were used to tap on intentions to engage in non-normative collective action: 'Would you join a boycott to contrast the oppression of disadvantaged individuals?'; 'Would you take part in unofficial (illegal) strikes to defend the rights of disadvantaged individuals?'; 'Would you occupy buildings or factories to contrast the oppression of disadvantaged individuals?'. We averaged the items in an index of non-normative collective action (alpha = .69).

6 | RESULTS

Means, standard deviations, and correlations amongst variables are presented in Table 1. As can be seen, sport identification was positively associated with the three types of moral perceptions. The three types of moral perceptions were positively associated with both normative and non-normative collective action. Normative and non-normative collective action were also positively correlated.

To test the hypothesized relationships, we conducted mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; Hayes, 2016). Predictor was social identity; the three types of moral perceptions were entered as parallel mediators; normative and non-normative collective action were the dependent variables. The model was run twice, one for each dependent variable. Results are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, when both sport identification and the three hypothesized mediators were simultaneously entered in the regression equation, both moral convictions and moral obligation were positively associated with normative collective action. When non-normative collective action was the dependent variable, only the association between moral obligation and non-normative collective action emerged as significant.

TABLE 1 Means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations amongst variables ($N = 111$)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sport identification	—					
2. Moral convictions	.28**	—				
3. Moral violation	.28**	.62***	—			
4. Moral obligation	.24*	.52***	.57***	—		
5. Normative collective action	.02	.32***	.19*	.36***	—	
6. Non-normative collective action	−.00	.30**	.21*	.39***	.33***	—
M	4.56	4.24	3.98	3.69	3.94	3.11
SD	0.55	0.58	0.86	0.95	0.89	1.09

Note: The response scale for all measures ranged from 1 to 5.
*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.***$p \leq .001$.

TABLE 2 Linear regressions testing the associations of social identity and morality perceptions with collective action ($N = 111$)

	Mediators			Dependent variables	
Independent variables	Moral convictions	Moral violation	Moral obligation	Normative collective action	Non-normative collective action
Sport identification	.29**(.10)	.44**(.14)	.42*(.16)	−.15(.15)	−.24(.18)
Moral convictions	—	—	—	.41*(.18)	.37(.22)
Moral violation	—	—	—	−.13(.13)	−.12(.15)
Moral obligation	—	—	—	.30**(.10)	.43***(.13)
F	9.37**	9.54**	6.68*	5.60***	6.02***
R^2	.08	.08	.06	.17	.18

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are presented (standard errors in parentheses).
*$p < .05$.**$p < .01$.***$p \leq .001$.

Inspection of indirect effects, assessed with bootstrapping procedures (5000 resamples), revealed that moral obligation mediated the associations of sport identification with both normative (point estimate = .12, 95% CI [.0197, .3344]) and non-normative collective action (point estimate = .18, 95% CI [.0417, .3957]). Moral convictions mediated the association of sport identification with normative collective action (point estimate = .12, 95% CI [.0069, .3017]), but not with non-normative collective action (point estimate = .11, 95% CI [−.0001, .3081]). Finally, moral violations did not mediate the effects of sport identification neither for normative (point estimate = −.06, 95% CI [−.2337, .1128]) nor for non-normative collective action (point estimate = −.05, 95% CI [−.2505, .1209]).[2]

7 | DISCUSSION

We conducted a study investigating whether sport identification is indirectly associated with solidarity-based collective action intentions via morality perceptions (moral convictions, violation, and obligation), using a sample of young football players from the grassroots of a professional club. Results revealed that sport identification was indirectly associated with greater normative collective action intentions towards individuals from disadvantaged groups via moral convictions, and with both collective action intentions forms via moral obligation.

7.1 | Theoretical implications

The key finding of this research is that sport identification was indirectly associated with willingness to support disadvantaged groups. This finding is important as it highlights the positive role of a social identity that has not been explored in the context of collective action before. The social identity we considered, that is the category of sports-people, is not embedded on the typical social hierarchy where disadvantaged individuals (such as those with disability or from foreign origins) are the low-status group. As such, social identities that are seemingly unrelated to the relevant social hierarchy can contribute to the pursuit of social equality; intentions to engage in collective action may have represented a means to express one's group identity and the values characterising it (Turner-Zwinkelz & Van Zomeren, 2021).

Importantly, such identity may motivate partly different pathways to collective action, compared with a social identity embedded in the social hierarchy (e.g., identification with being White, or with a social movement supporting Black people's rights, in the social hierarchy that includes White and Black people). Advantaged group members can, in some cases, perceive that their moral image is under threat when faced with the disadvantaged situation of lower-status groups (Shnabel & Ullrich, 2013), or they may experience guilt about their advantaged social position (Adra, Li, & Baumert, 2020), leading to support collective action to restore a positive moral image for their advantaged group identity. Along the same lines, Tajfel and Turner (1979) argued that advantaged group members can dissociate (also psychologically) from their ingroup when the threat to group image is too pronounced. In other words, their advantaged position may make advantaged group members especially sensitive to justice concerns, recognition of outgroup disadvantage, likelihood to experience moral outrage for a situation that also their ingroup is partially responsible for. By contrast, we argue that a dis-embedded positive identity, for example a sport identity, is less concerned with a potentially fragile ingroup image, and more likely to foster action because of adherence to and consistency with values and prosocial norms that characterise it. Future research can test mediators such as moral outrage and recognition of outgroup disadvantage, to empirically differentiate the different paths that sport identity and other social identities (e.g., politicized identities) can take in promoting collective action.

It is worth noting that, by not investigating specific disadvantaged groups, but by broadly referring to supporting individuals from disadvantaged groups in general, we did not limit the range of potentially affected disadvantaged groups. Indeed, while sport may generally favour the inclusion of individuals from disadvantaged groups like, for instance, ethnic minorities or individuals with a disability, our rationale potentially extends to all groups suffering some disadvantage. Future research may however investigate the limits of the potential of a sport identity to foster collective action towards different types of disadvantaged groups.

A further relevant finding is that effects occurred via morality perceptions, and specifically via moral obligation both in the case of normative and non-normative collective action. Moral convictions mediated the effect of social identity for normative collective action; the effect however was weak and disappeared when controlling for age (footnote 2). Although the three types of morality perceptions we considered have been shown to predict collective action independently, they had yet to be considered together (although there is evidence showing that–for both normative and non-normative collective action–moral obligation exerts stronger mediation effects than moral convictions; Sabucedo et al., 2018). Given that all morality perceptions were positively correlated with both forms of collective action (cf., Table 2), it is possible that moral obligation is a stronger predictor. Moral obligation refers to feeling obligated to defend one's moral principles, implying a sense of responsibility, which is a key aspect of allyship with disadvantaged groups (Louis et al., 2019). Therefore, it may be more strongly associated to behaviour than other more abstract forms of morality, for example, moral convictions, or forms that consider the violation of moral values but do not necessarily encompass the need to restore them, for example, moral violation. Acting upon moral obligation allows to directly connect the values characterising sport identity (e.g., equality and social inclusion) with the relevant defending behaviour. In other words, it facilitates the consistency between values endorsed in the self-concept (provided by the sport identity) and value-consistent behaviour (Festinger, 1957; Higgins, 1987).

It is worth noting that mediating effects occurred both for normative and non-normative collective action. Research has generally focused on exploring processes associated with normative collective action. Research looking at the role of morality perceptions on non-normative collective action has been scarce and the results are mixed. For instance, Cocco et al. (2022) found that advantaged group members' moral convictions were positively associated with collective action, while the association with non-normative collective action was nonsignificant. Teixeira, Spears, and Yzerbyt (2019) argued and found that advantaged group members may be unwilling to support non-normative collective action to protect their moral image. To the extent that moral obligation refers to core aspects of the self-concept and implies personal costs to fulfil own moral beliefs (Sabucedo et al., 2018), it is possible that it overpowers personal costs, such that the priority is being consistent with own moral values. Therefore, individuals who feel morally obligated to support disadvantaged groups may prioritize their support even when this is detrimental to their ingroup's moral image, like in the case of non-normative collective action.

The fact that sport identification is associated with greater non-normative collective action may be not entirely desirable. On one side, it is understandable that adolescence is a developmental age associated with engagement in social challenges and conflict with the established system (Eccles, Templeton, Barber, & Stone, 2003). On the other side, taking part to non-normative forms of collection action, which are often illegal, may do more harm than good, also in terms of legal consequences. Future studies should better clarify the relationship between sport identity and collective action, and understanding when it can lead or not to destructive behaviour.

The present results integrate and extend scarce research on collective action in young samples (e.g., Di Bernardo et al., 2021; McKeown & Taylor, 2022; Taylor & McKeown, 2021; Vezzali et al., 2021). Consistent with the developmental intergroup perspective, which places importance on group processes and adherence to group norms (Abrams & Rutland, 2008), we showed that a positive social identity is associated with moral considerations and indirectly to relevant social outcomes, such as helping disadvantaged people. In other words, identifying with a positive social group can contribute to the development of morality considerations in relation to the broader social context (Rutland, Killen, & Abrams, 2010).

It is worth noting that, while previous studies mainly examined moral prosocial and antisocial behaviour towards teammates and opponents (Kavussanu & Al-Yaaribi, 2021) and showed that a sport identity could favour prosocial behaviour within the sport setting (Bruner et al., 2018; Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014), the present results provided initial evidence that the benefits of sport identification generalize beyond the sport setting, encompassing support for disadvantaged individuals in the larger society. These findings speak to the phenomenon of bracketed morality in sport, indicating lower morality standards of athletes within rather than outside sport contexts (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Bracketed morality is reflected in moral behaviour: for instance, athletes are more prosocial towards teammates than towards other individuals, likely as a form of ingroup bias (Kavussanu, Boardley, Sagar, & Ring, 2013). We showed that identifying with a sport social group (and, we speculate, sport values associated with this identity) allows to extend morality principles to the wider community, possibly lowering the difference in moral standards sometimes applied within and beyond the sport setting.

The present work extends existing knowledge also in another important direction. While research has generally focused on moral disengagement and moral identity as relevant morality constructs predictive of antisocial behaviours (e.g., Boardley & Kavussanu, 2009), we investigated other relevant morality constructs associated with a sport identity, assessing their predictive role on prosociality (rather than anti-sociality) measures. Future research can integrate these different lines of research, for instance investigating how acquiring a sport identity contributes to shaping moral identity and in turn moral behaviour in the form of support of disadvantaged groups.

7.2 | Practical implications

The present findings have important practical implications. They show that football and more generally sport clubs can use sport as an educational tool, highlighting its positive values and the importance to adhere to the sport social

group and the social attributes that define it. For instance, the European Union projects 'Football for a Better Chance' and 'Football for a Better Chance 2.0' promoted by national football federations and supported by UEFA pointed on the educational value of football, fostering youth empowerment as well as civic engagement to help disadvantaged groups; to this aim, they also realised online training courses that can be accessed by coaches worldwide (football chance.eu).

7.3 | Limitations and future directions

SIMCA considers moral perceptions as antecedent to group identification (Van Zomeren et al., 2012), while in the present study we hypothesized an opposite direction. However, SIMCA strongly focuses on identification with politicized identities relevant to the intergroup situation (e.g., identification with a feminist movement, in relation to support for women's rights), therefore it is reasonable that one's moral perceptions drive the choice to join such a politicized group. In our case, the social identity (sport identity) is unrelated to the intergroup situation (where individuals from disadvantaged groups are the low-status group members needing support). Therefore, it is unlikely that moral beliefs related to the importance of social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals led to join a football team. Of course, our data are correlational; future studies should use experimental or longitudinal methodologies to make causal inferences.

We focused on young players from a professional football club in Northern Italy. Therefore, we caution on the generalisation of these findings to other contexts. As an example, while we investigated sport identification in terms of participants' identification with the superordinate sport category, they may be referring to their football identity specifically. Additionally, we used a male sample; future studies should replicate findings with females. Second, we focused on young players, for whom sport still represents an educational activity and who are trained to learn and respect sport identity values. Such values may be less relevant to adults playing football professionally, who may be more focused on competition. They may also be less relevant to players from other teams: our participants' football club is especially active in social responsibility activities and is explicitly concerned with providing its young players an educational rather than a mere professional sport activity. Third, we reasoned that in such a context players would be more likely to have a fused identity with their group, leading to high attachment (cf., Table 1) and greater likelihood to act in a way consistent with their social identity, but we did not include a measure of identity fusion; we encourage researchers to include it in future studies. Possibly, young people from non-professional contexts have a less strong and distinctive sport identity, making them less likely to engage in actions to fulfil the sport identity values.

A further limitation concerns the measure of moral conviction, whose reliability was slightly below the threshold of .60; findings should therefore be interpreted with caution. Another important limitation is that we did not directly assess values and social norms that characterise sport identity in participants' opinion. It would be important to consider participants' understanding of the values and norms associated with sport identities in future research. Finally, previous research has shown that intergroup emotions, like anger against injustice (or moral outrage), are strong predictors of both normative and non-normative collective action (Becker & Tausch, 2015). While in this study we did not include measures of intergroup emotions, future studies should consider their potential mediational role.

8 | CONCLUSION

In this research, we aimed at exploring the role of sport identification as a means to engage in collective action in support of disadvantaged groups. We specifically explored whether the path between sport identification and (normative and non-normative) collective action is mediated by morality perceptions. We found that sport identification and moral obligation can foster willingness to engage in collective action amongst young football players. We argue that using sport as a social tool to create a more equal society is a valuable endeavour for researchers, policymakers and practitioners.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Throughout the article, we use the term 'collective action' to refer to solidarity-based collective action, unless otherwise specified.

[2] Results did not change when entering age as a covariate, with one exception: moral convictions did no longer predict normative collective action ($b = .34$, $SE = .22$, $p = .124$), and the indirect effect by moral convictions was no longer significant (point estimate = .11, 95% CI [−.0100, .3026]).

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