

Research on Chinese Women's Super-League's Promotion

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Abstract. Chinese Women's Super League (CWSL for short) has a comparatively short history. Initiated in 1997, it represented the highest level of Chinese Football. Because of Covid-19, the Chinese Women's Super League changed into a tournament system and audiences were only allowed to watch online games. The purpose of the study was to help CWSL promote its notability under the circumstance of Covid-19 by using Neil Borden's marketing mix theory of 4Ps developed in 1950. SWOT analysis was used throughout the study. The result showed that the Chinese Women's Super League had difficulties improving its match quality and fan engagement online due to Covid-19 and its internal operation. Specific advice to improve the league's notability was listed below, including but not limited to opening clubs' official websites and players' official accounts, making sports videos, collaborating with well-known anchors, implanting a lottery system into the live broadcast, affiliating all women teams to men football clubs, increase the number of women teams and matches, and sell season tickets. Future studies will focus on specific online promotion strategies. In addition, after Covid-19 ends, future studies will generate new market strategies for all Chinese Women's Football leagues.

Keywords: Chinese Women's Super League; SWOT analysis; social media.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Chinese Women Super League has a comparatively short history. Initiated in 1997, it represented the highest level of Chinese Football. Starting in 2015, the league adopted the home-and-away system for the first time. However, due to Covid-19, the league changed back into a tournament system in 2020. Thrills happened in 2022 when the Chinese National Women Football team won the Asian Cup championship under the Covid-19 and the sudden change of line-ups. News and celebrations were bombarded through social media. This tough championship brought women's football unprecedented popularity. However, as expected, people's passion faded in one week. This kind of brief popularity appeared a lot in women's football history, but none can sustain it. The reason is obvious: most people only support Chinese women's football in national games. On the other hand, domestic women's football leagues are always lacking exposure. This weakens the athletes' incentive to maintain competitiveness and deters Chinese women's football future development. Therefore, this study will take the Chinese Women's Super League in the 2023 season as the research object. Some previous researches seek ways to improve the league's reputation. In 2010, Wang Jian's thesis analyzed CWSL's internal operation from the perspective of coaches, staff, match system, and financial status [1]. Then in 2010 Dec, Liang Honghai's thesis carried out information about Chinese Women Football's reserve personnel training system, which is the preparation for youth athletes [2]. In 2014, Xu and Li's research demonstrated methods for improvement in athletes' competitive level in CWSL based on their diet and training program [3]. In 2016, Wei Yezhen's dissertation discussed both the internal and external development of CWSL. Compared with Wang Jian, he focused more on sponsorship and connection to fans [4]. In 2019, Sun Lunin's report focused on the publicity and professionalization of CWSL's clubs from the matching system and marketing structures [5].

1.2 Research Gap

In general, most essays aimed to enhance the league's popularity by optimizing its internal system based on the realm of sports management. They proved effective, since, nowadays, CWSL's high-quality athletes, coaches, and competition format inflicts fans and spectators' vicarious achievement which influences the popularity. Moreover, Chinese women's football repossesses its dominance in Asia. Few previous studies also focused on consumers and the marketing level of CWSL. Their research advised on connection with sponsors and fans. However, these existing studies were too early, which might not be effective for aspects like offline matches as Covid-19 started to impact globally in 2020. Due to pandemic prevention, CWSL's matching system changed from a home-and-away matching system to a tournament system. A home-and-away matching system means every team should have their stadium which is their home court. If one team competes in another team's stadium, then it's called an away court to that team. A tournament system refers to a matching system in which all matches take place in one city's stadium. The tournament system was used for players' convenience and prevented Covid-19's impact. Due to Covid-19, fans were not allowed to watch offline matches. This led to the study's main problem: how should the Chinese Women's Super League promote under the circumstances of Covid-19?

1.3 Structure

Chinese Women's Super-League's decisions for next year cannot be determined by numerical values. Therefore, this study will use SWOT analysis as a quantitative approach to the problem. SWOT analysis is a method used to identify and assess internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats to help develop strategic goals. Last, the theory used throughout the SWOT analysis is the marketing mix theory of 4Ps. Since the league's popularity depends on the connection between clubs and fans, marketing theory helps determine and explains how can CWSL promote notability under Covid-19. The study's hypothesis answer is to change the league's focus to online services and improve it.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Marketing Mix Theory of 4Ps

The marketing mix theory was first mentioned by Neil Borden, an advertising professor at Harvard University, in 1950. Borden then published an article about the theory to describe the advertising tactics in the sixties [6]. The article's content described the marketing mix theory of 4Ps as a combination of four basic marketing tactics.

The four "Ps" refer to "product", "price", "promotion", and "place" with equal importance. The "product" part pays attention to the product's uniqueness and its function that maximizes consumers' utility [6]. Innovation is required to promote the "product" consistently. "Price" referred to the formulation of different price strategies in different market positions and stages [6]. Examples can be seasonal discounts and price discrimination. "Promotion" is the company's advertisement, public relations, and other publication strategies [6]. The motivation of promotion is to reach awareness for the product or service and create incentives to consume. Last, while entrepreneurs talk about "Place", they mean where should they deliver the product to the market [6]. They aimed to sell the product where the market is composed of interested consumers or fans. In general, "place" needs to be analyzed with "promotion". In 1980, a breakthrough had achieved in the realm of marketing due to the development of solid theoretical knowledge. Philip Kotler, a management professor at Northwestern University, developed a marketing mix theory of 6Ps as he published "Mega Marketing" in 1986 [7]. Kotler believed a company should possess two skills, which is "political power" and "public relation". "Political power" means companies must be acquainted with dealing with other countries [7]. Specifically, they need to know foreign countries' political and economic conditions to import effectively. This skill refers to big companies that are involved in international trade. "Public

relation” means to set up a good image of the product in the public [7]. Another famous expansion of the marketing mix theory of 4Ps is the marketing mix theory of 7Ps by Booms and Bitner in 1981 [8]. Around the eighties, service industries started to prosper beyond the product industries. While economists analyze the markets, they started to focus on product & service markets. Therefore, the two professors proposed three new strategies, which are “participant”, “physical evidence”, and “process management”. For “participant” and “physical evidence”, there are mainly two types of participants in the market: customer and service personnel [8]. Companies often have service training since a staff’s performance can completely affect customers’ cognition and preference toward the service quality and brand equity. “Process management” referred to the process that customers must go through before getting the service [8]. This is considered a part of the customer’s opportunity cost to buy that service. Therefore, customers will have a great tendency to consume a service with convenient process management.

2.1.1 Important Results

Together, these studies improved the marketing mix theory. Based on the theory, firms make strategies related to these aspects: price, product, place, and promotion.

From the aspect of price, price strategies set in festivals and particular times can maximize the firm’s revenue. This can be proved by the essay, “Price promotions in the vertically-related market: Instant discount vs. gift card” by Chen et al in 2021 [9]. It showed how instant discounts and gift cards create more revenues for the firms due to the price illusion effect and prisoner dilemma. The essay “Consumer reactions to price discounts across online shopping experiences” by Sheeran et al in 2019 specified price discounts’ effectiveness while consumers are shopping online [10]. The study “Measuring season ticket holder satisfaction: Rationale, scale development, and longitudinal validation” by scholars including McDonald et al in 2012 showed season tickets in sports industries are correlated to fans’ satisfaction positively [11].

From the aspect of the product, consumers are willing to pay for a high-quality product. The study, “The effects of vicarious achievement on BIRGing and CORFing” by Trail et al in 2011 showed fan’s sports team identification is positively influenced by the sports team’s vicarious achievement [12]. The writing, “Product quality and value from consumer perspective--An application to wooden products” by Ritva Marketta Toivonen in 2012 showed consumers perceived the product quality positively in the wooden furniture market in Finland [13]. The study “The impact of airline service quality on passengers’ behavioral intentions using passenger satisfaction as a mediator” by Imam et al in 2020 showed that service quality is essential for consumers’ willingness to pay and passengers’ satisfaction [14].

From the aspect of Place, companies aimed to sell the product where the market is composed of interested consumers. The study, “Place China’s land marketization: The state, market, and the changing geography of land use in Chinese cities” by Jiang and Lin in 2021 showed markets’ necessary existence in urbanized areas [15]. The study, “Application of spatial multi-criteria analysis to site selection for a local park: A case study in the Bergamo Province, Italy” by Zucca et al in 2007 proved the site selection of a local park depends on urban planning [16].

From the aspect of Promotion, the market should raise consumers’ brand awareness by cooperating with sponsors, giving information access, and connecting the consumers with loyal relations. The study, “Sponsorship image and value creation in E-sports” by Cuesta-Valino et al in 2022 said that sponsorship is the best way to engage consumers in this new sport [17]. The essay, “Social media content strategy for a sports club to drive fan engagement” by Annamalai et al in 2022 showed how sports clubs’ official pages and accounts’ interactions influence fan engagement [18]. The essay “Official website as a tourism marketing medium: A contrastive analysis from the perspective of appraisal theory” by Geqi Wu in 2018 discussed how official websites ameliorate online tourism marketing [19].

Overall, the marketing mix theory of 4Ps firms to reach consumers’ preferences, customize reasonable prices and allocate limited products efficiently to maximize profit.

2.1.2 Summary

In this study, the focus will be mainly on the original marketing mix theory of 4Ps. Price relates to this study refers to CWSL's ticket price and peripheral products price. Product refers to CWSL's vicarious achievement and the aesthetic value that audiences perceive. On-site service quality and online commentators also pertain to the product's quality. Place refers to the CWSL's online live broadcast platforms and the main venue on site. Promotion refers to the methods the league used to publicize its games. Through the theory, the study will explain how the Chinese Women's Super League promote under the circumstance of Covid-19 with the help of the SWOT analysis.

3. Results

3.1 Research Design

The research method is the SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is a method used to identify and assess internal strengths and weaknesses as well as external opportunities and threats to help develop strategic goals. Like qualitative research, SWOT analysis helps determine in which ways can CWSL improve its promotion based on its strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats. In addition, the study "Research on Application of SWOT Analysis Model in Chinese Professional League" by Pan et al in 2016 used SWOT analysis to investigate the internal factors and external factors of the Chinese Men Professional Football League's operation [20]. The results of the SWOT analysis advised the marketization and industrialization of the Chinese Men's Football League. Since this study and Pan's study have a similar research object and research question, this proved SWOT analysis as an appropriate method for this study.

3.2 Chinese Women Super League

As the study mentioned, due to the virus, CWSL's matching system changed from a home-and-away matching system to a tournament system. The site selection is based on the city's condition, cultural influences, and financial costs. For these three seasons, ten teams belonged from different cities. There existed a promotion system, which means the team that ranked the tenth at the end of the season in CWSL will degrade to league one. The champion of league one will upgrade to the Chinese Women Super League, which creates incentives for the football teams to maintain competitiveness. As the 2022 season just started on April seventh, the study will show statistics of the Chinese Women Super League's operation in 2021 [20]. There was a total of 8 Covid tests for an ensemble of people in the venue and the results were all negative [20]. The league held a total of 69 matches and made 178 goals [20]. There were 23 online platforms used to perform live broadcasts and publicize the matches [20]. The average views for one match were above 23800 spectators, and the accumulated views of all matches were above 5234200 spectators [20]. TV channels that rebroadcasted the matches had accumulated views of approximately 7228000 spectators [20]. The 23 platforms publicized 1517 real-time information and received a reading volume of over 2797 netizens [20]. The platforms also published 211 videos, including player interviews and front-line video blogs [20]. Furthermore, a SWOT analysis will investigate deeper into the Chinese Women Super League's recent operations in 2021 after the Covid-19.

3.3 Data Analysis

3.3.1 Strengths

Chinese Women's Super-League's first strength is the athletes' high wages and capability. According to the latest FIFA benchmark report for Women Football in 2021, the club's average annual operation cost and median annual operation cost in the Chinese Women's Super League ranked the first in the world women's football leagues, which is about 1.8 million dollars [21]. Among this output, 56% was used to pay for the player's income, which converts to RMB is 7.12million [21]. The wage gap between Chinese Men Football and Women's Football is still large, but compared with

other Women's Football Super Leagues internationally, Chinese Women's Super-League's athletes have reasonable wages. The second strength is the players' enthusiasm and concentration accompanied by the high wages. According to the FIFA benchmark report for Women Football in 2021, 95% percent of the athletes in the Chinese Women Super League took football as their primary source of income, which is above the average of the Women Super Leagues internationally [21]. In addition, in the report, the Chinese Women's Super League has an average of 35 players per club which is the highest number of athletes registered among all Women's Super-Leagues [21]. The high income also attracts high-quality foreign football players, for example, Tabitha Chawinga from Sweden and Barbra Banda from The Republic of Zambia, which furthermore increases the aesthetic enjoyment. The last strength is the relatively high revenues from sponsorship. According to the FIFA benchmark report in 2021, the Chinese Women's Super-League's club average revenue was 1.1 million dollars (7.11 million RMB), while 42% of the revenue came from the sponsors [21]. Therefore, the club could averagely get 0.46 million dollars (2.98 million RMB from the sponsors in 2021. Among all the known data from the FIFA benchmark report, only Japan has higher sponsor fees than China in 2021.

3.3.2 Weaknesses

Chinese Women Super League's audience attendance is still its first weakness. Due to the Covid-19, the league's matching system changed to a tournament system. However, unlike other league's tournament systems in which spectators were allowed to watch the game on-site, in the Chinese Women Super League, only the players, coaches, and staff stayed in the city that located the venue and competed in the venue. The audience was not allowed to watch the live game. In addition, the study has already noted the leagues' online broadcasts before. The statistics were not optimistic. Even though the online broadcasting covered over 23 platforms on different social media like Bilibili, Wechat Channels, and Weibo, the CWSL official's data in 2021 showed that the average view for one game is about 23800 people [20]. Besides, this number is a sum of all online platform's views. In other words, the average view for one game on one online platform is about only 1000 spectators. This is even less than the league's average number of spectators in 2019 on-site which is 1840 spectators [21]. Second, the clubs have no official websites to record players' statistics, publicize real-time information, and sell tickets and peripheral commodities. Chinese Women Super League only has official accounts on different platforms to spread schedules about the matches. Third, the league has few engagements with the fans. For America's NBA league, elite players may participate in community activities which will inflict fans' enthusiasm and belonging to the sports teams. Some players may even proceed to foreign countries to participate in certain fan receptions which brought them and their league population. A famous example is NBA players' China Trip. Having the most population in the world, China has a lot of loyal NBA fans. While NBA players travel to China, the net profit they gained from Chinese sponsors and fans is huge. Moreover, they made more and more people start following the NBA league, creating an effective and long-lasting fan effect. However, this is difficult and rare for the Chinese Women's Super League due to players' low notability. The last weakness is that the Chinese Women's Super League has only ten teams. From the FIFA benchmark report in 2021, most countries' national teams that ranked before China has more teams in their best leagues [21]. For example, in 2021, England, France, Germany, Hungary, and Sweden have 12 teams for their best Women Football Leagues, while Spain even has 18 teams [21]. The more teams the league has, the more matches they can hold, which will lead to more revenues and a solid fan base.

3.3.3 Opportunities

First, the recent Chinese national football performances brought women's football its notability. During the spring festival, the Chinese Men Football national team was defeated by the Vietnam Football team for the first time. This unbelievable loss enraged the Chinese football fans. Most of them turned their anger into expectations toward the China Women's Football national team. Chinese Women's Football national team was promoted to the semi-finals. They had to face the Japanese

Women's Football team on Feb the third. At that time, the Japanese Women's Football team was the defending champion. However, the Chinese Women's Football team defeated the Japanese team in a penalty shootout. Successively, they defeated the Korean Women's Football team and won the Asian Cup's champion under the condition of lagging before halftime. These two miracle wins raised people's awareness of women's football development. Second, starting from the 2020 season, Chinese Football Association (CFA) enforced every man's football club to include a women's football team, whether by creating a new one or merging with existing women's football clubs [22]. Men's football clubs without a women's football team didn't have chances to participate in the Chinese Football Premier League. This policy is effective since the teams affiliated with men's football clubs were only 10% of the total teams [21]. However, till now, nearly every man's football club contains a women's team. Since men's football clubs have better staffs., more assets, and a more mature youth training system. They are more possible to improve all Women's Football Leagues in the future.

3.3.4 Threats

Women's football is entering the period of the "Football Golden Age". It means clubs are investing oceans of money in their teams. This accounts for the first threat since the clubs pay extremely high incomes to foreign athletes. From the live broadcast, audiences started to see foreign players becoming the dominant forces in the matches as they made more and more goals. Clubs pay less attention to the development of native players and the talent reserve. Just like the "Football Golden Age" in Chinese Men's Football started in 2011, clubs had short-run benefits. However, the clubs couldn't bear the high financial burden in the long run due to high expenditures but low returns. Clubs failed to pay the staff and players. Foreign players dropped out of the teams. The media started to question the original intention of Chinese Football. The same situation should not happen to Chinese Women's Football. Second, Covid-19 is destructing the league's growing fan base. While in 2019, the Chinese Women's Super-League's matching system is still home-and-away. Due to the Covid-19, the matching system changed to the tournament system. Most local fans lost a sense of participation because of the only venue. Due to the transportation and virus, it's difficult for them to visit their favorite teams. In addition, for some extreme periods, fans were not allowed to watch the games on-site. However, match-day incomes accounted for a significant part of the club's average revenue before Covid-19. The last threat is the league's monotonous ticket system. Chinese Women Super League's clubs didn't sell season tickets throughout its history. Season tickets allowed fans to watch all home games in one season. Fans also have other privileges, like discounts on commodities, special parking, and member-only events. The season ticket can build up fans' connection, identification, and allegiance by making them a part of the team. The ticket system is impossible during the Covid-19 period; however, it should be promoted while audiences are allowed to watch games on site.

4. Result & Discussion

Overall, the Chinese Women's Super-League's strengths are its revenue, sponsor fees, players' capacity, income, and concentration, which are all far above average in the world. The strengths proved the Chinese Women's Super-League's competitiveness. The league's weakness is the audience attendance, lack of official websites, engagements with fans, and the number of teams. The weaknesses lead to the league's poor promotion and its internal operations, and they were amplified under Covid-19. The league's opportunities were created due to the excellent performances in national matches and the women's teams' affiliation with men's football clubs. The opportunities can bring temporary attention to the league and a more mature club operation. The league's threats were the clubs' high investments, the Covid-19, and the ticket system. Chinese Women League's financial operation is now above average in the world, but the future condition is not optimistic. To sum up, it's challenging for the league to maintain the expenses they spend before the Covid-19. In addition, the weakened financial condition makes Chinese Women's Super League difficult to ensure matches' competitiveness and aesthetic value to the consumers. The transition from on-site matches to live broadcasts isn't effective which leads to the consumers' gradually decreased interest in the matches.

Based on the results, the study will give several possible proposals. First, in the special period, the league should focus on its online promotion. There are no technical challenges to make an official website. The league and the clubs should have their official website and account on different platforms. Through the Covid-19, the official websites can let fans be acquainted with the teams by knowing their statistics and schedules. In addition, the leagues should encourage star players to open their official accounts on different platforms. Therefore, the league can produce high-quality documentary and interview videos for example in-depth interviews and quick Q&A. These funny videos can have a lot of click-through rates, and give the netizen a preliminary understanding of the Super League. Overall, it can influence online fan engagements. Second, for the online live broadcast, the Chinese Women's Super League may build collaboration with online celebrities. CWSL can invite well-known anchors on the online platforms as their commentators. Sports anchors will be the best choice due to their specialization. These anchors will bring their accompanied popularity to the league due to their fan base. Nintendo Switch often uses this strategy by cooperating with famous game anchors in the Bilibili platform to try out their new games for the first time. This ensured them to publicize their new games in a great dimension through the appropriate customers. Third, CWSL can implant a lottery mechanism in the live broadcast. The lottery mechanism can attract more visitors since the benefits of watching the games will increase. Last is some league's internal changes. the Chinese Football Association should make sure all women's football teams affiliate with men's football clubs. During the Covid-19 period, most women's football clubs are experiencing financial losses, while men's football clubs have more assets from their sponsors. The men's football clubs can provide subsidies and accompanied the popularity of women's clubs. Other internal adjustments include increasing the number of teams by promoting more women football teams from league one and selling season tickets after the Covid-19 ends.

To sum up, even though, the world is experiencing Covid-19, the Chinese Women's Super League still has the advantages from its excellent experiences in the national matches. As the sponsors and the league invest enough money, the next step is to mobilize the audiences' enthusiasm for the game. By building fan engagements, the league can turn more people into spectators, more spectators into fans, and more fans into loyal fans. Therefore, compared to the existed studies about the Chinese Women's Super League, this study focused on the league's recent statistics in SWOT analysis and give advice considering the effect of the Covid-19.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study's background is about the Chinese Women's Super-League's condition after Covid-19. The study focused on how to maintain and improve the league's notability under Covid-19 based on each aspect of the marketing mix theory of 4Ps, which are "Price", "Product", "Place", and "Promotion". The method used throughout the essay is the SWOT analysis. The result was similar to the hypothesis and the result added more information about the league's internal operation. The specific advice to improve the league's notability under Covid-19 is listed below. Chinese Women Super League should let the clubs open official websites, encourage the players to open their official accounts, make sports videos, collaborate with well-known anchors, implant a lottery system into the live broadcast, affiliate all women teams under men football clubs, increase the number of women teams and matches, and sell season tickets. These methods will contribute to a stronger fan base, and clubs' better internal operation, and ultimately lead to a positive online fan engagement. Overall, this study still contains limitations. First, there lacked prior researches about the Chinese Women's Super League during Covid-19. The researchers stated in the introduction gave effective advice to leagues, clubs, and players' training systems when the league was still having on-site matches. However, they may lose their efficacy during this special period. Since this is the first study that focused on the league's promotion under the Covid-19, flaws may exist. Second, the sources used are limited. Only two official websites which are the Chinese Football Association and FIFA had accurate data. In addition, most Chinese Women's Super-League's macroscopic statistics

in 2021 were from FIFA rather than the Chinese Football Association. Since there are only two sources, it's hard to check the accuracy of these referenced data. Third, the study made a thorough analysis of the league's situation under Covid-19 and advised ameliorating the problem. However, the change to internal operations has limitations. In addition, the study lacked statistics to prove the online and on-site market strategies. To sum up, some limitations like the league's statistics and internal operation are uncontrollable, so future research should extend to other limitations. The future study should focus on the Chinese Women Super League's online strategies including but not limited to methods to construct the club's high-profile official website, fans' preference toward different sports promotion videos, and ways to attract fans to the matches' live broadcast base on the original marketing mix theory of 4Ps and sports management. After Covid-19 ends, studies should focus on ways to recover the leagues' financial status including other women's football leagues at different levels.

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