

The Effects of Social Media on Consumer Engagement in Chinese Women's Football

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Abstract: As the Chinese women's national football team won the women's Asian Cup in 2022, it attracted people's attention back to Chinese women's football. However, this attention did not last long. Insufficient attention has always been a challenge for Chinese women's football, especially from a marketing perspective. This study aimed to explore how the social media promotion of the Chinese Women's Super League (CWSL) impacts consumer engagement. This paper applied the theory based on several literature reviews on the social media effect as an influential factor in consumer engagement. SWOT analysis was used to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for the CWSL. This research concluded that deficiency in social media promotion is the reason that leads to low attention, utilizing social media to promote CWSL affects consumer engagement to a larger extent if appropriate strategies are used. Thus, it revealed the importance of social media's effect on CWSL's consumer engagement. These findings can provide considerable strategies for the development of CWSL.

Keywords: SWOT; Social Media Effect; Women's Football; Consumer Engagement.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

On February 6, 2022, The Chinese women's football team defeated the South Korean women's football team to win the Asian Cup. At the time, social media such as Weibo and WeChat were filled with cries of celebration. However, most people's attention gradually declined after a week. It may seem strange, but in China, the majority of women's soccer supporters are casual fans and spectators. Through this essay, the report research how to make the Chinese Women's Super League better. This report focuses on enhancing people's participation in the Chinese Women's Super League and finding ways to make the league better. There is little research on women's football as there is the public interest in it, so that's what this report is all about.

1.2 Research gap

There are three problems in the exploration that make the attention and participation of the Chinese Women's Super League (CWSL) not high. The first one is that due to the low marketing level of the Chinese football league, clubs pay a high cost, but the income of clubs is not in proportion to the high cost they pay. Secondly, the location of the league is chosen in a relatively remote place, which makes the attendance rate not very high, even lower. Last but not least, the inadequate publicity of radio and publications leads to low brand awareness, which makes many viewers may not know when the league will be played and at which stage, let alone the participation of fans in activities and matches. According to a comprehensive international survey, 70% of women's football clubs in the world are in the red. Only 13 percent of clubs earn more than \$1 million in revenue, with more than half of that coming from sponsorship deals. Football's For the FIFA Benchmark assessment, which tries to establish how best to promote the women's game, the global governing body examined 30 leagues and 282 clubs [1]. And this is not just a problem in China. The core of this paper still lies in the

changes that the Chinese Women's Super League should make in the market. For both men's and women's football teams, the league is the foundation of the national team, and the first step is to stabilize the league so that the national team can perform better. These changes could affect women's football to move to a new stage, where more than half of the team will not be in serious arrears unless they can increase their revenues. Women's football needs more attention and participation, and the increase is not enough. Women's football cannot go unnoticed. Because of the situation of women's football, this report precisely presents the problems and gives some recommendations. It is urgent to study and analyze the current situation of the Chinese Women's Super League, find problems and actively seek countermeasures, which have practical significance. This report aims to find a good way to develop Chinese women's football and develop women's football clubs suitable for China's national conditions.

1.3 Structure of This Paper

The purpose of this paper is to make customers more engaged in CWSL, which can be accomplished through some changes in marketing strategies. Firstly, this paper reviews Consumer Engagement and the social media effect. Next, this paper analyzes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of CWSL from the perspective of marketing using the SWOT method. Then suggestions to CWSL are provided through the research reviewed. After that, the concluding remarks are presented.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Consumer Engagement (CE)

"Engagement" was first widely used in sociology, politics, psychology and other fields to describe specific states of connection and attachment. Over the past decade, most of the research in marketing paid particular attention to CE, especially as a result of the growth of social media and the transformation of marketing strategies. In 2010, Van Doorn et al. defined customer engagement behaviors as "the customer's behavioral manifestations toward a brand or firm, beyond purchase, resulting from motivational drivers". They defined CE from the perspective of psychology and believed that CE is a psychological process of establishing a brand relationship based on emotion and cognition [2]. CE refers to the customers' investment or commitment to the brand and products. Brodie et al. in 2011 showed that CE is a psychological state, which occurs under a specific condition. The process is dynamic and iterative within the concept of co-create value [3]. In the same year, Hollebeek published a paper demonstrating that CE is a psychological condition characterized by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activity that is motivated by a brand. [4]. Considering the connection between brand and customers, in 2014, Hollenbeck et al. proved that CE is beneficial to the brand by analyzing empirical evidence [5].

2.2 Definition of Social media effect

The effect of social media is widely used in various fields today. There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of the social media effect. About 30 years earlier, the establishment of a social networking site "Open Diary" by Bruce and Susan Abelson started the generation of social media, and with the rapid development of the Internet, the term "Social Media" has appeared in the public sight [6]. Bayer et al. in 2020 defined social media as internet-based and supported asynchronous interaction. They reviewed the core value of social media should be generated from the interaction with other users and social media should broadcast information to large audiences [7]. Chan classified five social media tools in his analysis of the landscape of social media in 2013, which included social networks and blogs, bookmarking sites, collaborative projects, content communities, and social reviews. This author also interpreted five social media characteristics: collectivity, connectivity, completeness, clarity, and collaboration [8].

2.3 Important Results

Scholars have carried out systematic studies on the influencing factors of CE. Some studies have put forward corresponding conceptual models to explain the driving mechanism of CE. The first study of this was reported by Verhoef et al. in 2010. They mentioned the research framework of CE and analyzed the antecedent variables of CE from consumers, enterprises and environment perspectives [9]. In 2010, Van Doorn et al. constructed a conceptual model of CE. They also analyzed the influencing factors from three aspects of consumers, enterprises and the environment and then explained the management process at the same time [2]. Wirtz et al. based on the study of online brand communities constructed a conceptual model of CE from the dual perspectives of consumers and enterprises in 2013 [10]. Three years later, Pansari and Kumar researched antecedent variables and outcome variables of CE from the perspective of consumers and enterprises and concluded that CE can bring performance growth to enterprises [11].

The social media effect has been widely adopted in the marketing area. In 2012, Kumar and Lakshmi examined the social media effect on advertising, seeking better communication with their consumers [12]. This analysis showed that this approach is feasible. However, it is a two-way channel, it can enhance loyalty or damage the brand's image [12]. This theory was also confirmed by Filo et al. in 2015 [13]. This study shared a similar research direction as this article. The authors investigated the expediency of social media platforms and the effect of social media on marketing from sports brands' perspectives [13]. Summarized the sports brand consumers' attitudes, motivations, behaviors preferences for social media. By analyzing the findings from 70 journal articles, Filo et al. specified the combination of social media and sports brands' marketing strategies have developable opportunities [13].

Several studies have more direct and specific illustrations of how social media affects consumer engagement. An analysis was done by Audy Martínek in 2021 have attempted to use a systematic literature review methodology to investigate how social media affect consumer engagement with brands [14]. This study advocated that the consumer-brand engagement evolved, it could be positive or negative action toward the brand [14]. The study conducted by Ashley and Tuten in 2015 revealed that updated content on social media frequently incents consumer engagement through the method of content analysis [15]. This result was also proved by In Tafesse in 2016, the author utilized the effect of social media to investigate the experiential affordances of Facebook brand pages and their impact on consumer engagement [16]. The authors pointed out that interactive strategy can contribute to consumer engagement successfully [16]. This strategy needed to rely on consciously generating attractive and interesting content, to create a long-term, trusting relationship between the brand and its customers [16].

2.4 Summary

Overall, these studies outlined the influencing factors of CE and noticed that it can have a positive effect on the brand. However, no one paid much attention to the CE in the field of sport, especially sports for women. Several studies have postulated a convergence between social media and its effect on various fields. These authors authenticated that the social media effect is positively related to consumer engagement with appropriate strategies. According to the studies mentioned above, it is now well established that in the field of marketing, social media plays a significant role. One thing should be noticed from all these studies. All authors mentioned social media can benefit the marketing promotion, but it could also be double-edged. And that makes a statement that using the concept of social media effect is applicable only if the marketing strategy is attractive to the consumers. These studies highlighted the need for social media. All the studies reviewed here support the hypothesis to a large extent. To a certain degree, popularizing the Chinese Women's Super League on social media will give a higher profile towards it.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This paper mainly adopts the SWOT method for research. In a sense, SWOT analysis is internal analysis. Simply speaking, SWOT analysis is a systematic analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and future development trends of internal structure and external environment. This method is more comprehensive, systematic and structural.

3.2 CWSL

Organized by the Chinese Football Association, the CWSL is the highest level of the professional football league in China attended by Chinese women's professional football clubs. The league started in 1997 as a descendant of the original China Women's Super League, with champions allowed to participate in the China Women's Super-Cup. In 2011, the Women's Super League changed its name to The National Women's Football League and adopted a double-cycle division system. In 2015, the women's soccer league was sponsored by LeEco, with two live TV matches per round. Only 4 teams participated in the first edition, which was the first time that the Chinese Women's Football League adopted a home-and-away system for matches. By degree of marketization of Chinese women's football is insufficient, low visibility, women league format changed frequently, mainly in the early away round-robin, since 2003, took the north-south partition and final format, still give priority to road dual cycle, the 2005 season match took area SaiHuiZhi form, and Chinese women's football league merger since 2007, Take the north-south division and the final system for the competition system. Because of the small number of Chinese women's football clubs, the women's football league has no mature promotion and demotion system. Starting in 2015, the league adopted a home-and-away system for the first time and created some local fans. But due to COVID-19, the league reverted to a tournament system in 2020. Kunming was chosen as the venue.

3.3 SWOT Analysis

3.3.1 Strength

Those who worry about the high income of Chinese women's football are not empty talk. According to the "FIFA Benchmark Report: Women's Football", the investment of the Chinese women's football league ranks first in the world, The average investment of clubs is about 1.85 million US dollars, of which the average salary is about 1.036 million US dollars. That compares with \$615,000 in Germany, \$675,000 in South Korea and \$145,000 in Japan [1]. The qualitative change in Chinese women's football began with the appointment of Shui Qingxia. Shui Qingxia joined the Shanghai Women's Football Team in 1984 and played in the Shanghai team until she retired at the age of 35. She was an important member of the old women's football team, winning the gold medal at the 1994 Hiroshima Asian Games, the silver medal at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and the silver medal at the 1999 Women's World Cup.

Shui Qingxia started her coaching career in 2001. She has been working in the National Youth Women's Football Team and Shanghai Youth Women's Football Team and has led Shanghai Women's football team to win the league champion, FA Cup champion and national championship champion many times, becoming one of the most senior women's football coaches in China.

Late last year, Jia Xiuquan, the head coach of the Chinese women's soccer team, stepped down after his contract expired during its disastrous run to the Tokyo Olympics. By the strategy of the "Great National Team" formulated by the General Administration of Sport of China, the Chinese Football Association has arranged for an organized Chinese women's football team to participate in the National Games. Shui Qingxia was appointed to lead the team and won the gold medal in the National Games.

Under the impetus of several rounds of football reform and combined with the excellent tradition of Chinese women's football, The Chinese football circle has been exploring various aspects from management mode, business mode, talent training, technical and tactical research to football culture

communication, in response to the new global trend of the masculinity of women's football and the involvement of capital in women's football competitions.

As women's football matches become more and more confrontational, fans pay more and more attention to women's football matches. The traditional revenue models represented by commercial sponsorship, TV broadcast, match day income, team peripheral sales, etc., support the professionalization exploration of women's football leagues in some countries. An influx of capital from the men's market has spawned women's clubs and leagues in England, Germany, Sweden, France and Spain, as well as the Champions League. In 2021, BBC and SKY signed a three-year contract with the English Football Association to buy the broadcast rights of women's Premier League for 24 million pounds, setting a new record price for the TV broadcast rights of women's football.

3.3.2 Weakness

First of all, the lack of broadcasting and publications leads to low brand awareness. There is an FTV channel that broadcasts every CWSL game from 2018 to the present. The Propaganda Department of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee has approved the football channel, as has the National Radio and Television Administration, which is the first professional TELEVISION channel to promote the reform of football in China. However, few people paid attention to the channel. Inner Mongolia Broadcasting Network Information Transmission Co., LTD., is one of the few regional TV stations that can broadcast to fewer cities and regions. In addition, with the progress of technology, network broadcast has come into people's sight. Most people prefer to watch the clips of sports matches but pay less attention to the live matches. Due to the short time and late start of industrialization, Domestic sports marketing and football marketing in China are still in their infancy, and the overall scale is still far behind that of the United States and other countries with mature sports markets. Sports marketing in the US is seven times larger than entertainment marketing, while Sports marketing in China is only similar in scale to variety advertising. In addition, according to the research data from the International Olympic Committee [17], the market for sports sponsorship in North America was 7.7 times that of China in 2015, which means there is still a lot of space in marketing.

Furthermore, The Chinese women's football team spends a lot of money, but the tournament makes little money. According to the "FIFA Benchmarking Report – Women's Football" released by FIFA in May 2021, the average annual income of Chinese Women's football clubs is 1.1 million US dollars [1]. Income comes from sponsors, associations, competition income, program production and broadcasting, among which, sponsors and associations accounted for the majority, accounting for 42% and 26% respectively (Figure 1) [1]. The proportion of clubs breaking even or making a profit was 30 percent (Figure 1) [1]. Players' wages account for 56% of the club's total expenditure (Figure 1) [1]. The reason why the income of women's football teams is lower than that of men's football teams is the problem of competition income. No one watches, no tickets can be sold, no TV rights can be sold, and no one sponsors the women's football league because of its low commercial value. Taking the number of spectators as an example, the report showed that the average attendance of the Chinese women's football league in 2019 was 1,840, with the biggest attendance being 11,863 for Beijing vs Wuhan [1]. Such figures are not on the same order of magnitude as the attendance at men's football matches.

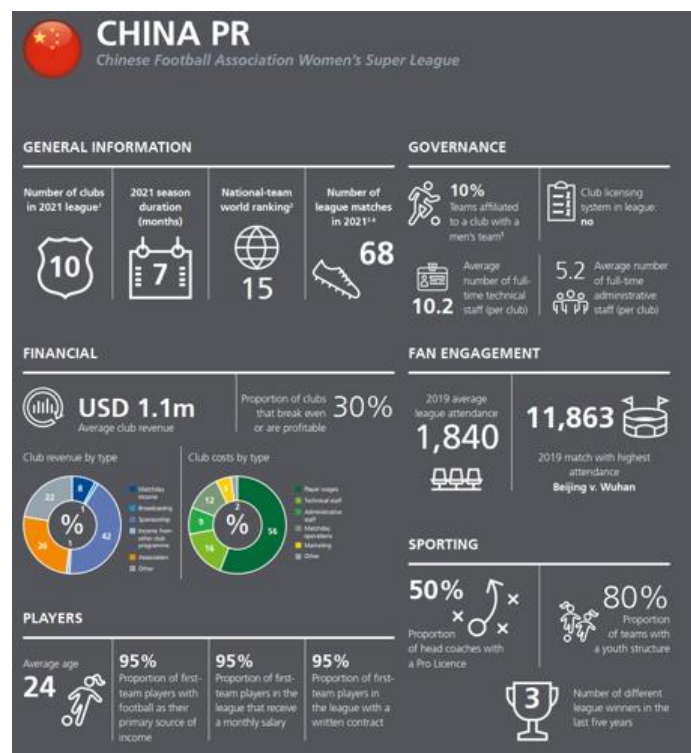


Figure 1. Chinese football association women's super league [1]

3.3.3 Opportunities

First is national policy support. In 2015, the General plan of Chinese football reform and development (hereinafter referred to as the “General plan”) ushered in an unprecedented opportunity for the development of Chinese football [18]. According to the General plan, a competitive market mechanism for the broadcasting rights of football events has been established to achieve orderly competition for the broadcasting rights of football events. In addition, the revenue distribution mechanism of broadcasting rights of football events is reformed to ensure that event organizers and participants of CWSL could become the main beneficiaries. The broadcasting and promotion operation of football events is innovated, and the integration of traditional media and new media on the football field is promoted, thus increasing the revenue of CWSL through social media. Also, the publicity of football has been innovated. The Chinese government has strengthened the management of football news to gather social consensus on football reform. Therefore, CWSL can take this opportunity to innovate publicity and make better use of social media to promote the league. The “three-step” strategy in General Plan sets “returning women's football to the ranks of world-class teams” as the medium-term goal to promote the development of women's football. It elevates the strategic status of women's football development and provides good policy support for the development of CWSL [18].

Secondly, FIFA's Women's Development Program provides a good opportunity for CWSL to develop. According to FIFA's Women's Football Strategy, FIFA is offering eight new women's football development programs for the period 2020-2023 and says all FIFA member associations are now eligible to apply for these programs. They are designed to provide member associations with financial assistance as well as policy support (including access to women's football experts, additional equipment and technical support) [19]. The CWSL can apply to FIFA for support in the “League Development” area, which provides CWSL a better opportunity to promote it through social media.

Thirdly, CWSL has a good economic environment. According to the FIFA Benchmark Report of Women's Football in 2019, the investment of CWSL ranks first in the world (Figure 2), and the revenue of CWSL is the second-highest around the world (Figure 3) [20]. From the data, it can be

seen that CWSL has a strong economic basis on which to grow. A large amount of capital investment and revenue brings opportunities for the development of CWSL.

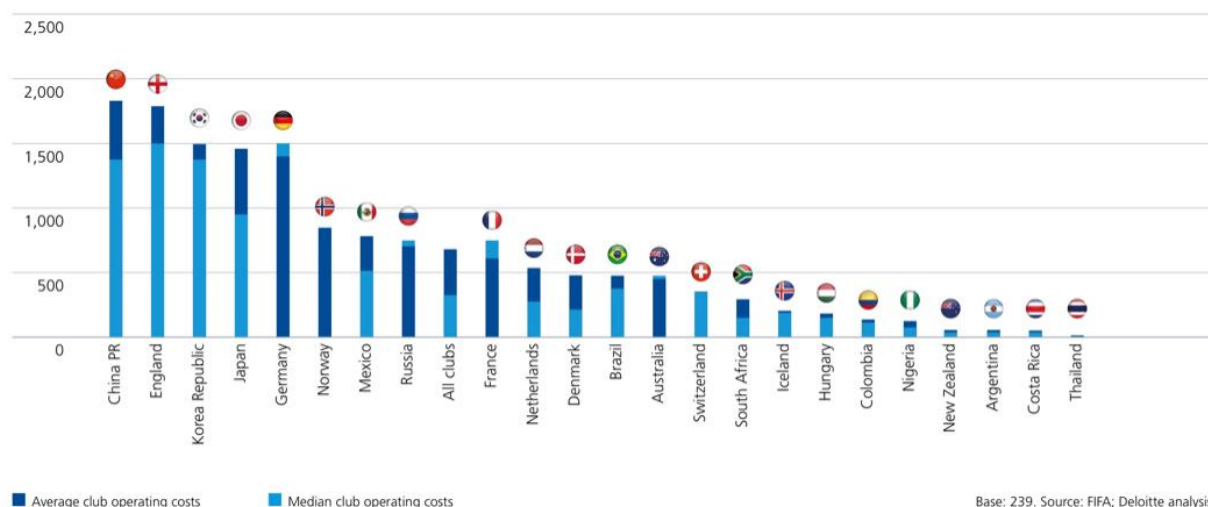


Figure 2. Average and median club operating costs (USD' 000s) [20]

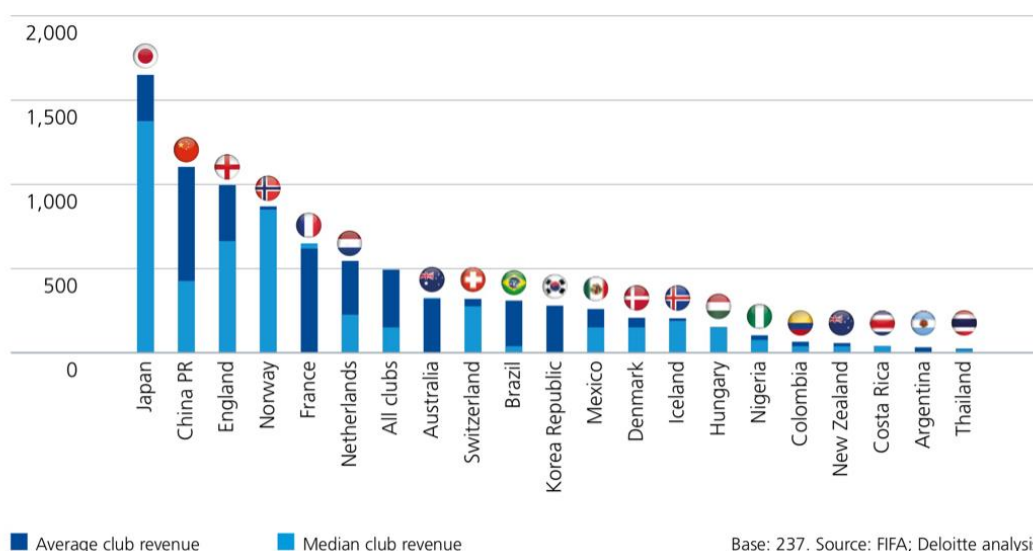


Figure 3. Average and median club revenue (USD'000s) [20]

3.3.4 Threats

As for the threat to the CWSL's objective of expanding brand awareness, the first problem is the lack of sponsorship. LeTV used to sign a five-year contract to acquire the broadcast right and became the main sponsor of the CWSL in 2015 [21]. Due to LeTV's capital chain rupturing, the partnership unwound in 2017. Subsequently, no one took over the broadcasting right of the CWSL. Then it fell into a vicious circle, and tickets and broadcasting rights could not be sold. As a result of being difficult to commercialize, it is hard to attract sponsors to invest. This dilemma is not only for the CWSL but also affects women's football globally. According to FIFA Benchmarking Report in 2021, 70% of women's football clubs experience a financial loss [22]. Secondly, holding large-scale sports games is affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this pandemic, the priority is public health and safety. Considering the policy regards to public health, the venue, participants, and spectators are all restricted, in turn, the consumer engagement is influenced. FIFA has reported the importance of social media to engage with fans in this pandemic [22]. As reported to FIFA in 2021, it can be seen that about half of clubs in China encountered a 0-20% to 21-50% reduction in revenue due to the pandemic

(Figure 4) and only 5% of club costs are used in marketing perspective (Figure 5) [22]. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and no promotion of social media is unquestionably a big threat for CWSL.

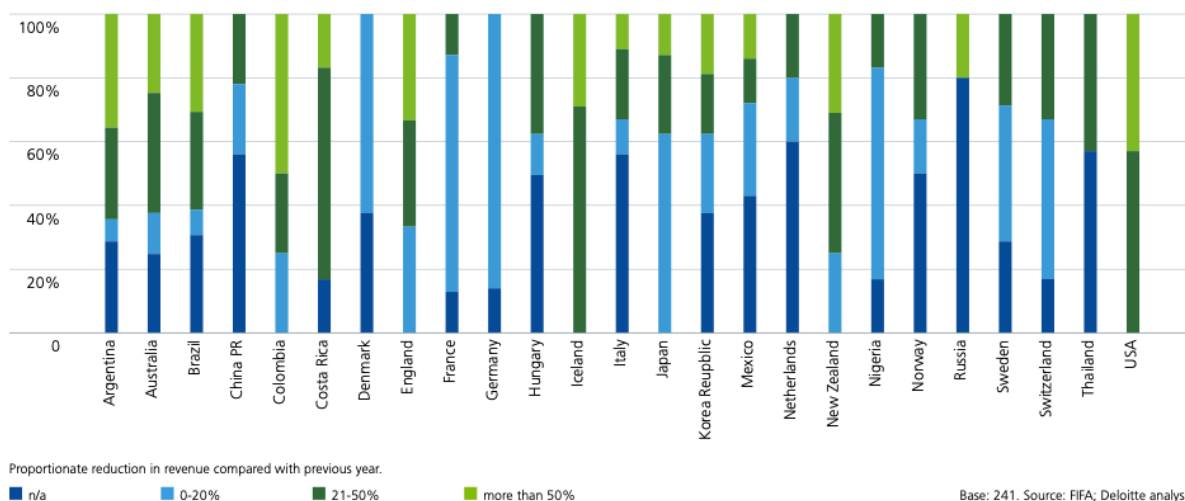


Figure 4. COVID-19's impact on league revenue in 2019/20 (or 2020) as a percentage of previous year (%) [22]

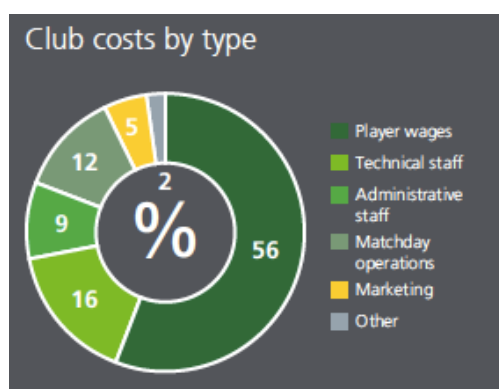


Figure 5. Club costs by type of Chinese Football Association Women's Super League [22]

4. Result & Discussion

This paper analyzes CWSL by SWOT research framework and finds that CWSL itself has many advantages and disadvantages at the same time. For example, in terms of the promotion of CWSL, a lot of money is invested in CWSL for its better development. With the power of many sponsors and broadcasters, the popularity of CWSL has increased and more customers are attracted to it. However, although China has set up a special channel to broadcast every CWSL game, expecting to increase the attention of fans through social media. The truth is that this channel is only used by a small fraction of clients. Therefore, it is difficult to promote CWSL in this way. Secondly, in the external environment, CWSL is facing many threats while having many policy opportunities. Although China has introduced a series of policies to support the development of women's football. Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, only a few fans could engage in the games, which also highlights the importance of social media. Only through the advantages of social media in promotion, can CWSL avoid more losses.

This article explains the relationship between the consumer engagement of CWSL and social media. It can be seen that the deficient promotion of social media for CWSL affects consumer engagement to a large extent. And it can be inferred that the social media effect is positively related

to consumer engagement. According to the results from the SWOT analysis, there are several suggestions and recommendations provided.

Firstly, to extend the strength of CWSL has a large investment and makes up for the shortage of low level of social media promotion and little money that tournament makes. Increasing the fund in marketing, spending more money on propagating CWSL on social media to engage more people to know and watch the CWSL.

Secondly, the Chinese women's football team just won the 2022 Asian Cup and their earlier good race performance; it is good timing to promote CWSL if they can piggyback on the women's Asian Cup achievement. This might be helpful with the transformation of identity, spectators, or temporary fans into loyal fans. It could also build hype on social media before the league, to increase the interaction of football players and fans. For example, design countdown posters and carry out prizes game like the lotto, to guess which team would win the league or what the score would be. To increase the number of spectators, the online broadcasts need to create incentives for the platforms' visitors to watch the game. Interaction with fans aids the establishment of psychological attachment.

Thirdly, it is recommended that to build and popularize an iconic football player. This strategy might be accessible to enlarge the consumer market. As reported by Pifer et al. in 2015, a star player can assist a team's performance, attendance rate, and ticket sales [23]. They took LeBron James, a famous NBA basketball player as an example to show the role of a star player [23]. With being a member of the Cleveland Cavaliers organization, attendance doubled and turn the table on the declining tendency of ticket sales [23]. The successful example provides a reference model for the CWSL. Once the players become more and more popular and people tend to watch the league, their commercial value will rise, followed by the sponsors.

The next point is the support of national policy and FIFA's Women's Development Program provides a great opportunity for the development prospects of the CWSL. The revenue distribution mechanism of broadcasting rights might attract more sponsors to invest. Utilizing this opportunity to foster CWSL. The CWSL should seize the chance of political and financial provision to increase the publicity on social media which improves consumer engagement.

Lastly, as mentioned the COVID-19 threat to CWSL also demonstrated the importance of social media at this time. During this pandemic, the opportunity cost for the fans and spectators to watch an in-person match is high. It also suggests that increase the club cost in social media promotion, for the reason of ensuring safety, meanwhile, keep the consumer engagement to the greatest extent.

The research examines the view of Filo et al. in 2015, Ashley and Tuten in 2015, and Tafesse in 2016, promotion by social media makes an impact on marketing perspective and consumer engagement [13, 15, 16]. The finding of this research is consistent with the previous research that social media and consumer engagement could be positively related. However, in the research from Saravanakumar and SuganthaLakshmi in 2012 and Audy Martínek in 2021, they argued that social media is double-edged, which could have both positive and negative effects [12, 14]. Social media can affect engagement constructively if appropriate marketing strategies are made [12, 14]. This outcome is unable to verify in this study.

This paper supplements the research gap in CWSL and provides some referential recommendations for the development of CWSL. The current study has inherent limitations due to limited research on women's football. It could only conclude that low consumer engagement by cause of insufficiency of social media and was not yet determined if enhances publicity will boost people's attention toward CWSL. Future research should explore both benefits and drawbacks of social media in promoting CWSL. There is a need for future research to understand further implications of social media.

5. Conclusion

In the new media era of amplification, superposition and multiplication, highlighting the value of winning the championship for women's football team and bringing women's football team more

commercial value and identity. In a way, the women's victory was an act of self-redemption. Capital is coming in, and capital is watching. In professional sports, star athletes will occupy most of the value of the sport, but they will also broaden the whole sports market and expand the pie of the sports industry, to give more people more opportunities. Today's praise and harvest, Chinese women's football team are from the struggle and efforts and the era of technological progress and spiritual pursuit. The development of the sports industry in the new era needs such a sports team, and the Chinese women's football team is also worthy of this era. Despite the vicissitudes of time and the changes of The Times, the spirit of the Chinese women's football team on the field, unity, struggle, and unyielding resilience, bring the same touch. But how to retain capital and fans, is still for women's football jubilation after the long-term problem. Professionalism and marketization are the female football players out of the low-paid antidote. Women's teams are also increasingly being sponsored unilaterally, rather than bundled with men's teams. In the future, there will be more markets for women's sports. However, under the situation of a great number of strong players in the world of women's football, how the Chinese women's football team can find its way is the most important problem that should be considered at present. The development of women's football cannot be separated from anyone, even though the decline of women's football has become a fact, the spirit of women's football sonorous roses has never stopped. Maybe the women's football team has fallen behind, but maybe one day in the future, when the national football culture becomes popular, the women's football team will come back and stride forward to its former peak and glory, or even surpass it.

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