

Perceived corporate social responsibility performance in professional football and its impact on fan-based patronage intentions: An example from Chinese football

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Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility Performance in Professional Football and its impact on Fan-based Patronage Intentions: An example from Chinese Football

Abstract

Purpose

This paper analyzes fans' perceptions of the CSR activities of a professional football club, specifically whether or not perceived CSR performances are then likely to influence patronage intentions of the fans in relation to the football club.

Methodology

The paper uses the example of a professional football club in China as a case study for data analysis. Based on a sample of 451 home team fans, analysis was conducted through calculation of descriptive statistics, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of perceived CSR performance on fan's patronage intentions.

Findings

The results revealed factor 3 ("CSR to customer and employee"), and factor 4 ("Community development and youth education") were significantly predictive of all the three patronage intention variables, i.e. repeat purchase, Word of Mouth, and merchandise consumption. In addition, factor 2 ("charity") would also affect merchandise consumption intention, but have no effect on any other dimensions.

Originality/Value

A scale measuring perceived CSR performance in professional football clubs by the fans in the Chinese context has been developed. In addition, we have identified that the two main

CSR factors that would influence fans' patronage intentions, i.e. "CSR to the customer and employee" and "community development and youth education". Thus, if football clubs are to use CSR strategically to leverage spend then it is these two areas that they should focus on explicitly in relation to CSR activities. This paper adds value to an area that is currently under-researched in respect of CSR activities in Chinese professional football.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, professional football, patronage intentions, China

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (hereafter referred to as CSR) is of growing interest to professional football clubs and is seen as one of the key areas of modern corporate sustainability on the business, public and research agenda (Breitbarth and Harris, 2008). However, it is not necessarily classed as a new phenomenon. Indeed, Inoue, Kent and Lee (2011) trace discussions on the topic back to the early 1950s, citing the work of Bowen (1953) as an example. The CSR construct as we know it today, however, has evolved over the last four decades (Carroll, 1979; Margolis and Walsh, 2003; McWilliams and Siegel, 2000). The essential components of the phenomenon, as described in the literature, have remained relatively constant over time (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). The majority of definitions of CSR present in the literature addresses "societal relationships" (e.g. Wood, 1991, p.693) and the four elements of economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary as defined by Carroll (1979). More recently, CSR has been contextualized as generally referring to an organisation's duty to maximise its long-term positive impact on society, while simultaneously minimising its negative effect (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013). Similarly, Mohr, Webb and Harris (2001) offer a similar definition stating that CSR is generally defined as "...a company's commitment to minimising or eliminating any harmful effects and maximising its long-run beneficial impact on society" (p.47).

Interest in CSR from organizations of any type and size has accelerated rapidly in recent years, with the field of sport management not being immune to this development (Paramio-Salcines, Babiak and Walters, 2013). Based on the increasing number of academic papers around the topic focusing on a multitude of CSR theories in recent years such as institutional theory (e.g. Babiak and Trendafilova, 2011; Slack and Shrives, 2008; Trendafilova, Babiak and Heinze, 2013), stakeholder theory (e.g. Babiak and Wolfe, 2009; Breitbarth and Rieth,

2012; Hamil and Morrow, 2011; Walters and Tacon, 2010), stewardship theory (e.g. Extejt, 2004, Inoue et al., 2011; Walters and Chadwick, 2009), resource-dependency theory (e.g. Bingham and Walters, 2013) it is arguable that CSR is still challenging to measure and consists of many different variables, particularly when applied to the sports industry. A large proportion of the literature on CSR in sports is situated in a Western context, primarily focusing on Americana and European team sports. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to attempt to analyze the impact of CSR in an emerging sports industry in the East. We do this by analyzing perceived CSR performance in professional football and its impact on fan-based patronage intentions in the Chinese football industry. It is here where the paper provides its strongest contribution. In the same way that CSR has increased in importance during the last decade, so too has the Chinese football industry. Our paper finds that, overall, the evaluation of CSR performance by the fans on each scale item measured was in general positive. A further contribution in this regard is that CSR appears to be important to sports fans in emerging markets as well as established ones. Thus, this paper provides a contribution to the literature on CSR in a Eastern context, furthering the research agenda on CSR in professional sport in general.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Next, we outline the rise of Chinese professional football in the context of CSR to provide the necessary background information. Following this, we present the literature linked to the importance of CSR in professional team before outlining the methodological approach taken. We then present the results and discussion before concluding and summarizing the implications and direction for future research in the area.

Background : CSR, China and Chinese Professional Football

Literature relating to CSR in Chinese professional sports teams is scarce as is the literature relating to CSR more generally in China. Indeed, Ip (2008) stated that despite the increasing attention in recent years to CSR in advanced economies in the West, CSR awareness in Asia is rather low, both on the corporate and state level. This was further underlined by Gao (2009) who attempted to find out how the top 100 companies in China were performing in relation to CSR by undertaking content analysis of company websites. One of the conclusions of the paper was that CSR in China is still in the beginning stage, and CSR is different among different industrial companies. It is also important to note that China has a completely different culture and political economy than the West. It is reasonable to presume that CSR in China is therefore somewhat different from its Western counterparts (Gao, 2009).

China is also in the development stage in relation to professional football with the Chinese Super League only recently achieving global media attention through the signing of high profile Western players. As Hong and Zhouxiang (2013) indicate, the development of a professionalized and commercialized football league in China began in 1993 and was followed, in 1994, by the launch of a league system that was modelled on the systems of Western countries. With support from the market, football clubs became more financially solvent and moved away from government intervention and aid. State-owned football clubs were replaced by privately owned and collectively owned clubs. By 2016 the migration of players from Europe to Chinese clubs had reached a critical mass with significant transfer fees and player salaries being offered, all to put Chinese football on the global map (Chadwick, 2015).

Given that the emergence of CSR in Chinese literature is a relatively new phenomenon and that the Chinese Super League and its clubs appear to be displaying signs of growth, the

timing is relevant for a paper that examines CSR, and its impact, in Chinese professional football. We aim to address this particular research gap and contribute to the research on CSR by analyzing consumers' (fans) perceptions of the CSR activities of the professional football club, using Shanghai Shenhua, in China as a case study. The key focus is to examine the perceived CSR performance of a football club from the perspective of its fans and whether or not fan perceptions are then likely to influence patronage intentions in relation to the football club.

Literature Review

The Emerging Importance of CSR in Professional Team Sports

CSR in sport is a relatively new concept and professional sport organizations are now entering into socially responsible initiatives at a rapid pace (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). As noted previously, the majority of studies related to CSR have been orientated towards the benefits of corporate initiatives to the organizations, rather than focusing on the impact, effects and influence of CSR actions on consumers' perceptions and opinions (Giannoulakis and Drayer, 2009), however, the impact of CSR requires measurement particularly in relation to customer perceptions (Babiak and Wolfe, 2006).

An increasing number of teams that have set up charitable foundations as part of their business operations during the last decade and a half, particularly in American team sports in the first instance (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). Similar operations are being introduced in the UK and European football industries, although this is not currently the case in China. This appears to suggest, certainly in a European context, that professional sports teams are placing more emphasis on the development of CSR programmes. Indeed, the philanthropic activity of these foundations is an area regularly cited in CSR sport literature (e.g. Inoue et al., 2011). This particular paper focuses exclusively on professional football clubs and the impact of

their CSR activities on fans/consumers. There is little doubt that during the last two decades sport, in particular professional football, has extended its reach into the global market place. Professional football is the sport with the most followers (and viewers) on the planet and the media coverage of sport entertainment assures a disproportionally high degree of visibility of small and medium size enterprises as well as larger ones (Blumrodt, Bryson and Flanagan, 2012). European clubs and their competitions, for example, are widely broadcast in Europe and in Asia, so much so that even smaller clubs have started to investigate these markets (Soderman, Dolles and Dum, 2010). Recently, this relationship between European football and China has become increasingly reciprocal. Not only has the overseas market for broadcasting rights been increasing (particularly in relation to the EPL) but cash rich Chinese investors are showing a desire to invest in the European game as well with Chinese investment currently evident in football clubs across Europe including in England (Manchester City), Spain (Espanyol and Atletico Madrid), Czech Republic (Slavia Prague), France (Sochaux) and the Netherlands (ADO Den Haag) (Wilson, 2015). Subsequently, football has a 'virtuous' potential from promoting various forms of development (Levermore, 2010). However, on the other hand, the product of professional football (and other sport) is heavily tarnished and has throughout history been associated with cheating, corruption and exclusionary practices (Levermore, 2010). Blumrodt et al. (2012) also note the positive and negative values attached to football but also state that such poor conduct in relation to football and other sports is not new, and that corrupt dealings might equally be viewed as human nature and the understandable quest for power and influence (Blumrodt et al., 2012). They argue that society does not evolve in a totally benign manner, and sport is no exception, and the values inherent in sport also change. Despite this, sport also has positive values: the education of children, the health of the public, and the identity and morality of the nation.

Ethical values are largely related to sport in general and by extension also to sports clubs (Godfrey, 2009).

Perceived CSR in Professional Football Clubs

Philanthropic Activities, Community Involvement and Environmental Initiatives

Based on evidence from US team sports two key CSR practices are adopted. First, teams engage in CSR by implementing community outreach programs, such as athlete volunteerism, community development, youth educational initiatives, and environmental programs, through their community outreach or community affairs department (Babiak and Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Walker and Kent, 2009). In China, though few professional football clubs have an independent department responsible for community affairs as in the US or Europe (You, 2008), there is increasing activity which indicates the implementation of community outreach programs to show their social responsibility. For instance, the Chinese Super League launched an annual “CSR award” in 2011 to commend clubs from the Chinese top flight league for CSR performance based on public and media votes, and the five football clubs that won the 2013 edition “CSR Award” were all heavily engaged in philanthropic activities and community involvement and without establishing their own philanthropic foundations, many of them would also work in partnership with other philanthropic organizations or foundations (Sohu Sport, 2013).

The second practice that teams adopt to engage in CSR is to establish independent charitable foundations to enact their philanthropic activities (Inoue et al., 2011). Indeed, Babiak and Wolfe (2009) stated that nearly 90% of American sports teams currently have their own charitable foundations. The primary activity of these foundations is to provide charitable contributions to local organisations operating programs in the areas of education, youth development, community development and health related issues. Schemes across

Europe have used the power of football to empower clubs to create social intervention opportunities at the heart of their communities that can positively change lives for the better (see Premier League, 2015).

Youth Educational Initiatives

An additional focal point of CSR activity is on youth education including grassroots sports, the training of young players, social inclusion, gender and racial equality and athletes as role models for young people. Community outreach initiatives which address social issues with an emphasis on programs that support education, youth and family development, as well as health-related causes are evident across the US (Giannoulakis and Drayer, 2009). Youth education is also a focus of Chinese football clubs social responsibility initiatives. For instance, Shanghai Shenxin football club launched a Smoke Free Stadium for Kids program in 2014 by engaging more than 15,000 children and their parents through community or grassroots football camps or activities (SINA Sport, 2014). Furthermore, in a bid to win the above mentioned annual social responsibility award and build club image, Beijing Guoan Club worked in partnership with a number of primary schools on youth education programs, such as organizing friendly games between their star players and school children and campus tours (SINA Sport, 2014).

In modern day sport, athletes can no longer decide whether or not they are role models; they are essentially thrust into the role of prominent public figures the moment they become professionals. Subsequently, they are left with a choice regarding their role in the lives of their supporters; however, that choice is not whether to be a role model or not, it is whether to be a *positive* role model or not (Giannoulakis and Drayer, 2009). Research in the extant literature has demonstrated the influence and magnitude of athletes as role models, especially on teenagers (e.g. Biskup and Pfister, 1999; Lines, 2001; Stevens, Lathrop and Bradish,

2003). In light of this, CSR activities that engage with youth education initiatives are becoming increasingly important to professional sport organizations.

Health Initiatives

Despite the fact that health initiatives are often discussed when considering philanthropic and community activities in relation to CSR, there is an argument to indicate a clear distinction. One of the largest and well-publicized initiatives linked to health is the Football Fans in Training (FFIT) program that has seen growth in the European football industry in countries such as England, Scotland, Norway, Portugal and the Netherlands. FFIT in the UK, for example, uses professional football clubs as a setting for a weight management group. However, the key difference in this program compared to other general weight management programs is that FFIT is predominantly aimed at the male population. The rationale behind this is that commercial and National Health Service (NHS) weight management programmes are still predominantly attended by women, and this is reflected in the growing evidence base on what works in weight management interventions (FFIT, 2015). Subsequently, in an attempt to provide a program more attractive to the male population, FFIT was implemented. The FFIT research team hoped that men's loyalty to their football team would encourage them to sign up. Men taking part in FFIT are 'trained' by club community coaches for 12 weeks at their team's home stadium. They receive a programme of advice on how to eat more healthily and become more active, grounded in current science. Men are also given a pedometer to count the number of steps they walk each day. The scheme has proved to be extremely popular so far and academic evidence disseminated so far by the FFIT research team bears testament to this success (e.g. Hunt, McCann, Gray, Mutrie and Wyke, 2013).

Financial Responsibility

Evidence from Europe points to the increasing commercialization of professional football (Hamil and Chadwick, 2010) and the requirement to generate additional revenue to manage burgeoning costs (Plumley, Wilson and Ramchandani, 2014). However, the downside of such commercialization has been mounting criticism of various business practices (e.g. poor governance, financial problems, corruption, and controversial players' behaviour). A common denominator across the wealthiest leagues in Europe; namely England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, is the ever-increasing brand exposure and visibility that European football clubs have, which makes calls for greater transparency and accountability either an unavoidable strain (Slack and Shrives, 2008), or an opportunity to strategically (re)position "business affairs" (Walters and Chadwick, 2009). The caveat to this is that a number of European leagues and clubs have faced financial difficulties in recent years and many clubs appear financially unsustainable (see Andreff, 2007; Ascari and Gagnepain, 2007; Barros, 2006; Dietl and Franck, 2007; Dimitropoulos, 2010; Wilson, Plumley and Ramchandani, 2013). Whilst some of these issues may appear to be internal, financial responsibility is linked to CSR as it is important that the club is perceived to be financially stable and conforming the regulatory requirements to both their fans, in respect of operating in the 'right' business manner, and, to the an external audience, in respect of tax regulations and potential punishments for poor financial performance.

Stakeholder Management

Success in the sport industry necessitates the ability to work within a complex set of stakeholder relationships; a team cannot operate without the cooperation of many organizations (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009). As such, relations with stakeholders such as the media, players, various levels of government, sponsors, fans and local communities, can benefit from CSR activities (Wallace, 2004). All organizations in the sport industry have to

1
2
3 interact with the different stakeholders listed above and there are two primarily reasons
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5 evident in the literature as to why CSR activities benefit these relationships. Some
6
7 organizations believe that doing good is the right thing to do, and are involved in such
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9 initiatives for noble reasons. Some organizations, on the other hand, believe that doing good
10
11 is good for business and are motivated by pragmatic matters (Mintzberg, 1984). Many of
12
13 these pragmatic reasons have been noted above and are concerned with projecting a positive
14
15 image, generating goodwill among various stakeholders, countering negative media scrutiny,
16
17 and/or receiving tax breaks and subsidies from governing bodies (Babiak and Wolfe, 2009).
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19 A third potential viewpoint is to propose a bridge between the "right thing to do" and "good
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21 business rationales for CSR in organizations (Porter and Kramer, 2002).
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27 Recognising the importance of various stakeholder groups in the implementation of CSR
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29 was also the focus of Walters and Tacon's (2010) study. The crux of their work was that in
30
31 order for football clubs to enjoy the best possible benefits that CSR implementation can offer,
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33 a multiple stakeholder perspective - that is, an outside-in approach - should be more seriously
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35 considered (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013). A further recommendation by Walters and
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37 Tacon (2010) is that this exercise primarily requires the identification of the most salient
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39 stakeholders in such considerations.
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44 *Responsibility to Spectators*

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47 It is widely accepted that sports teams have a responsibility to spectators
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49 (Anagnostopoulos, Byers and Shilbury, 2014). Indeed, previous sections on *financial*
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51 *responsibility* and *stakeholder management* cited the need for transparency and the
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53 importance of spectators in a stakeholder context. It is also widely acknowledged that there is
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55 a reciprocal relationship between fans and their football club. As such, a fundamental premise
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of our research is to pose the question as to whether fans' perceptions of their teams CSR activities affect their patronage intentions towards the club.

Theoretical Framework

CSR engagement and Patronage intentions

Patronage can simply be defined as the financial support or business provided to a store, hotel, or the like, by customers, clients, or paying guests. Much of the general marketing literature surrounding patronage cites consumer behavioral theory and motivations (e.g. Mason, 1999). Pritchard et al. (2007) then furthers this research by considering the constraints around patronage intentions such as marketing, structural, cultural, social and personal constraints. These were previously defined as five types of barriers to patronage by Lepisto and Hannaford (1980). When considering these barriers, it also becomes clear that sport organizations (in particular professional team sports) are in a privileged position to deploy CSR owing to the influence of fan loyalty to a team. In this case, it is reasonable to suggest that because fans have an association to their team and for the most part remain loyal to that team for their whole life that some of the above barriers are removed. For example, it may only be that personal constraints such as lifestyle changes would be the only barrier to reduced patronage by fans in relation to professional team sports. Furthermore, sport teams are in a more privileged position to deploy CSR when one considers the general rationale for CSR engagement.

One of the widely cited rationales for CSR engagement is that CSR is good financially for the organization and can lead to greater profits or greater public support which may in turn bolster profits (Margolis and Walsh, 2001; Pava and Krausz, 1996). Several studies have investigated patronage regarding consumer perceptions of socially conscious businesses (e.g., Porter and Kramer, 2002; Ricks, 2005), and have found that corporate associations influenced

overall consumer attitudes about the organization. Specifically Hoeffler and Keller (2002) argued that corporate social marketing can help build brand equity and increase sales. But the impact of CSR on patronage is far from certain as it first appear. While some studies showed that socially responsible activities would engender favorable attitudes (Ross, Patterson and Stutts, 1992) and purchase intentions (Sen and Morwitz, 1996), Polansky and Wood (2001) maintained that the “over-commercialization” of some activities designed to benefit society may in fact harm the attitudes of consumers targeted by these activities.

The Impact of CSR in sports on fan's patronage intentions

In the context of sports, Walker and Kent (2009) is one of the few studies that empirically examined the impact of perceived CSR in professional sport on patronage intentions. In this study, fans of two NFL teams were sampled and the results showed that there were significant main effects of CSR on word of mouth intentions and merchandise consumption. However, repeat purchase and media consumption were found to be not significantly affected by CSR. The authors suggested that media consumption and repeat purchasing were not influenced by CSR due to their high product relatedness; but merchandise consumption and word of mouth are elements less related to the core product and thus were more likely to be affected by CSR. But the authors also pointed out that the conclusion regarding the CSR-patronage relationship warranted future investigations.

It is clear that there has been an increasing emphasis on CSR within the sport industry and the examination of the effects of CSR on patronage intentions warrants enquiry. Furthermore, the timeliness of our paper is even more relevant given the emergence and rapid growth of professional football in China. This literature review was constructed in relation to the central pillars of CSR activities in sport. The paper now presents the research purpose and methodology before discussing the results of the study.

Research purposes:

1. To identify the dimensions of fan-based perceptions of CSR performance by a professional football club in a Chinese context.
2. To examine whether the perceived CSR performance would have any effect on patronage intentions of the fans.

Methodology

Scale development and questionnaire design

Adopting scale development techniques as described by Churchill (1979), the scale of CSR performance was formulated through the following three steps:

- (1) item generation through an extensive review of literature;
- (2) conducting a test of content validity through a panel of experts; and
- (3) conducting a pilot study to examine measurement properties.

An initial scale measuring the CSR was first developed based on existing literature and consisted of dimensions and items used in other CSR studies (Babiak and Wolfe, 2006; Blumrod, Desbordes and Bodin, 2013; Breitbarth and Harris, 2008; Walker and Kent, 2009). As a result, a scale consisting of 31 items were obtained along seven dimensions: philanthropic activities; community involvement; youth educational initiatives; health initiatives; financial responsibility; environment protection; and responsibility to spectators.

Second, the items were sent to a panel consisting of three sport management professors and three postgraduate students majoring in sport management for discussion and improvement. As a result, an additional 4-item dimension with regard to responsibility to employees was added, and in addition, four other items (food safety, honesty to consumers,

increase of sports participation, models for young people) were also added to the scale. With revision, rewording and changes from above steps, the final legacy instrument contained 39 items along eight dimensions. The items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree).

To test reliability of each item in the suggested dimensions, a pilot study was conducted by involving a non-random sample of 94 undergraduate students who were enrolled in economics and management courses in Shanghai. The reliability of each item was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alpha if-item-deleted statistics. The eight alpha scores ranged between 0.792 and 0.889 indicating that the scale items in the specified dimensions were internally consistent. As a result, all 39 items were retained for the formal survey study.

The questionnaire consisted of questions divided into the following categories: demographic questions, a question asking whether the respondent is a fan of the home team (Shanghai Shenhua Club) or not, questions relating to the perceived CSR performance, and questions regarding fan's patronage intentions. Questions regarding fan's patronage intentions were modified from existing literature (in particular from Walker & Kent, 2009) testing, repeat purchase, merchandise consumption, and word of mouth. These items were found to possess adequate reliability scores based on the pilot study with Cronbach's α scores ranging from .803 to .889.

Data collecting

An empirical survey study was conducted in which data was collected from live spectators in the home stadium of Shanghai Shenhua Club when the home team was playing Guangzhou Fuli Club from South China, on July 4th, 2015. Shanghai Shenhua Football Club (also known as Greenland Shenhua Club) was founded on 10, December of 1993 and has

since been playing in the top flight of Chinese football. Located in Shanghai, the club enjoyed a strong fan base and won the domestic league championship twice (1995 & 2003). Eight trained college students were assigned to the stadium to collect data through self-completion structured questionnaires. In general the respondents approached were cooperative and willing to answer the questionnaire (response rate of approximately 75%), and in total 500 questionnaires were eventually distributed and collected for further analysis.

Data analysis

Procedures in SPSS 22.0 were utilized to analyze the perceived club CSR performance through calculation of descriptive statistics, and exploratory factor analysis (EFA). While our initial scale has "seven dimensions", this is a result base on extensive existing literature review, and actually it can be seen from the literature reviewed, different authors have been using very different scales and there is so far little consensus regarding a well-established scale measuring CSR of professional clubs even in the western context. As we are one of the first studies trying to develop a scale to measure CSR performance in the Chinese context, we choose to use EFA due to the exploratory nature of the research. Regression analysis was conducted to determine the impact of perceived CSR performance on fan-based patronage intentions.

Results

General Profile of Fans

Over 90% of the respondents identified themselves as the home team fans. Table 1 shows the general profile of the sample, and it can be seen that the (89.4%) majority of the fans were male. It can be seen that the fans were relatively young with the age group between 18-25 accounting for almost half of the population (45.2%), followed by age group of 26-30

for another 27.5%. Descriptive analysis shows (table 2) that the evaluation of CSR performance by the fans on each scale item was in general positive and all well above the midpoint of indifference ranging between 3.50 and 4.54. The lowest score was for “financial transparency” and highest for “no doping policy”.

<Table 1 about here>

<Table 2 about here>

Factor Analysis

To examine the dimensions underlying the perceived CSR performance by fans, a principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was undertaken. During several steps, a total of seven items were eliminated because they did not meet the minimum 0.50 factor loading criterion or they double loaded on more than one factor. The factor analysis was conducted again with the remaining items. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.949, and the communalities were all above 0.5.

The factor loading matrix for the final solution is presented in Table 3. A total of 32 items were loaded on 6 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1, and these factors explained 67.21% of the variance. The 6 factors were titled “Public health” (6 items), “Charity” (5 items), “CSR to customer and employee” (7 items), “Community development and youth education” (6 items), “Economic and financial responsibility” (5 items), and “Environmental responsibility” (3 items). Cronbach alphas ranged from 0.835 to 0.90 and were considered to be satisfactory.

<Table 3 about here>

Effects of Perceived CSR Performance on Fans’ Patronage Intentions

With each of the three patronage intentions of fans as a dependent variable, all six impact factor variables were entered into a step-wise multiple regression analysis to determine the impact of perceived CSR performance on fan’s patronage intentions. The results (Table 4-6) revealed factor 3(“CSR to customer and employee”), and factor 4 (“Community development and youth education”) were significantly predictive of all three patronage intention variables. In addition, factor 2 (“charity”) would also affect merchandise consumption intention, but have no effect on any other dimensions. It also revealed that CSR factors 1, 5 and 6 (“public health”, “economic and financial responsibility”, and “environmental responsibility”) had no significant impact on fans’ patronage intention variables.

<Table 4-6 about here>

Discussion

Using fans of a professional football club in China as an example, the main purpose of this paper was to examine the dimensions of CSR performance perceived by fans and then investigate to what extent the perception of those CSR activities would influence patronage intentions. The research led to a scale measuring the perceived CSR performance in football club with a total of 32 items loaded on 6 factors, which were titled “Public health”, “Charity”, “CSR to customer and employee”, “Community development and youth education”, “Economic and financial responsibility”, and “Environmental responsibility” respectively. In addition, there are interesting conclusions to be drawn from the regression analysis undertaken in relation to how perceptions of CSR activities can have an influence on

patronage intentions. It is noted in the extant literature by a number of authors (e.g. Giannoulakis and Drayer, 2009; Mohr, Webb & Harris, 2001; Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) that it is important to consider the effects of CSR actions on consumers and this paper attempts to provide some insights into this area based on our sample. The results of each regression analysis will now be discussed in turn with reference to extant literature. Regression analysis was undertaken on all CSR factors and three different dependent variables; support of professional football club, trustworthiness of professional football club, future spectatorship intention of professional football club, intention to buy professional football club licensed products, and, intention to recommend professional football club to friends and family.

Across all three dependent variables factors 3 and 4 (CSR to customer and employee and community development and youth education) were significant and likely to influence patronage intentions. In many ways, these findings are consistent with the existing literature and justify, to some extent, clubs' decisions to focus on community development, youth education and building relationships with fans through CSR. As discussed in the literature review, teams engage in CSR by implementing community outreach programs, such as athlete volunteerism, community development, youth educational initiatives, and environmental programs, through their community outreach or community affairs department (Babiak and Wolfe, 2006, 2009; Walker and Kent, 2009). Sports teams have become acutely aware that one of the most important areas that CSR in sport organisations addresses is issues that are centred on youth education including grassroots sports, the training of young players, social inclusion, gender and racial equality and athletes as role models for young people. Our findings support this evidence in the literature and imply that if a sports team is perceived to be doing these things well then this will significantly impact on the patronage intentions of fans. On this evidence, it is of little surprise that nearly 90% of American team sports

currently have their own charitable foundations that focus on community and youth engagement and that the biggest league in world football (the EPL) also established its own charitable fund in 2010 which, among other things, aims to use the power of football to empower clubs to create social intervention opportunities at the heart of their communities that can positively change lives for the better.

Often, community development and youth education is bookended into philanthropic activities of CSR alongside other factors such as environmental aspects. With reference to our results, the perceived CSR factor of charity is significant in the patronage intentions of fans (see table 7). This also links to one of the main reasons for deploying CSR linked to philanthropy in the sense that doing 'good' is in turn good for business. It is possible that the assumption here of fans is that the club conducts their charitable activities well and that the club has a positive brand image that fans want to be associated with by purchasing licensed products. However, if this were the case, then it would appear strange that this factor only appears to be significant against one dependent variable and not some of the others such as support of the team or future spectatorship intentions.

The factor of CSR to customer and employee (factor 3) is also significant in influencing patronage intentions of fans in our study when measured against all three dependent variables. The mean scores indicate that the perception of the fans is that the club are good at CSR activities such as being honest to consumers, improving fans satisfaction, looking after their employees wellbeing and treating all employees fairly. This in turn significantly influences their patronage intentions towards the club. This is most closely related to the CSR dimension of stakeholder management in the extant literature. Wallace (2004) outlined that relations with various stakeholders such as the media, players, fans and local communities can benefit from CSR activities. Mintzberg (1984) also outlined that some organisations

believe that 'doing good' is good for business and that, pragmatically, this projects a positive image of the organisation, generating goodwill among various stakeholders including employees, extant and potential customers and the local community (e.g. Porter and Kramer, 2002). The results of this paper appear to confirm some of these theories as the CSR to customer and employee factor is perceived to be good at the club and that this also translates to significance in the patronage intentions of fans.

The results of our study also find that a number of CSR factors had no significant effect on the patronage intentions of fans. Indeed, CSR factors 1, 5 and 6 (public health, economic and financial responsibility and environmental responsibility) showed no significance in relation to the regression analysis. All of these factors are deemed to be CSR activities that clubs feel it is important to undertake given the literature available on the topic (although environmental activities are often merged with charity activities) yet none feature as being significantly related to patronage intentions of fans sampled in our study. This is perplexing given the perceived importance of these activities in the literature review, particularly with reference to public health and financial responsibility.

Public health initiatives have become increasingly more common in English and Scottish football in recent years particularly with reference to the Football Fans in Training (FFIT) program. This program was developed with clubs in the hope that men's loyalty to their football team would encourage them to sign up and the scheme has seen positive results since its inception in 2010. However, for our sample, public health initiatives do not appear to be significant in predicting patronage intentions. Whilst schemes such as FFIT are seen as a good idea, it does not seemingly automatically translate to having a direct impact on behavior intentions of fans. However, it would be interesting to analyse schemes like this from a non-fan perspective to see whether or not people that do not support the club(s) are more likely to

support them (or consume from them) in the future based on their work to attempt to improve public health. Furthermore, for our sample, the lack of significance in relation to behavior intentions of this factor could be reflective of the wider society in which these fans live. In England, Scotland and the wider western world, for example, there is a growing obesity crisis which makes schemes like this all the more important. Obesity levels, at the present time, in China are not as high as Europe and the West and this CSR activity may not be particularly high on the agenda of sports teams in China.

A similar scenario, with reference to the external social climate, could also help to explain why financial responsibility was not significant in predicting fans' behavior for our sample. Much of the literature cites the ever-increasing brand exposure of professional football clubs in the wealthiest leagues in Europe (namely England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain) (e.g. Slack and Shrives, 2008). It is this exposure and visibility that makes calls for greater financial transparency and accountability an unavoidable strain. At the present time the Chinese professional football league does not generate as much revenue and exposure as the leagues cited above and that could be one potential reason why fans do not view this CSR factor as having an influence on behavior intentions. A further cause could be linked to the social and emotional aspect of fandom. As Couvelaere and Richelieu (2005) point out, it is highly unlikely that the majority of fans would 'substitute' the team they support for another team in the same way a consumer may do when deciding whether to purchase a product or not. Thus, it is arguable that football fans may never regard financial transparency as an important CSR activity in the same way that they perhaps would when considering stakeholder expectations of general businesses.

In addition, while Walker and Kent (2009) suggested that repeat purchasing was not influenced by CSR due to their high product relatedness, the current study showed that

certain dimensions of CSR could have an impact on both core-product related dimension (repeat purchase) as well as non-core product related intention (eg. merchandise consumption and WOM). This discrepancy further confirms that the CSR-patronage relationship is complicated and warrants further research.

Conclusion & Implications

The purpose of this research was to analyse consumers' perceptions of the CSR activities of the professional football club and whether or not consumer perceptions are then likely to influence patronage intentions of consumers in relation to the football club. In respect of our study, focused on Shanghai Shenhua Football Club in China, a 6-factor CSR scale containing 32 items was identified, and overall the evaluation of CSR performance by the fans on each scale item was in general positive. In addition, we have identified that the two main CSR factors, using our scale, that would influence patronage intentions are "CSR to the customer and employee" and "community development and youth education". Thus, if football clubs are to use CSR strategically to leverage spend then it is these two areas that they should focus on explicitly in relation to CSR activities.

As stated in the introduction, it is arguable that CSR is still challenging to measure and consists of many different variables, particularly when applied to the sports industry. Consequently, we do not offer a silver bullet here that will enable Chinese clubs to guarantee repeat patronage from consumers. However, our findings strongly indicate that Chinese clubs would be better focusing on CSR activities linked to the customer and employee and community development and youth education. Given that the methodological approach is robust given past work in the field, these findings provide a strong basis for clubs to direct a positive course of action at a strategic level. This is the main contribution of the paper on a

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practical level but it also contributes academically by furthering the research agenda on the impact of CSR on patronage intentions in Eastern cultures.

Limitations and Future Direction

Essentially there are two limitations to this study. Our research focuses explicitly on one club in the Chinese football industry. As such, results are not generalizable outside of this industry at the present time. Furthermore, the respondents in our study were fans of the club which may have caused unconscious bias in the responses. Thus, other clubs need to be evaluated in order to grow the research agenda on CSR in professional sport, particularly in the Far East, and how they might compare to more well-established European teams. Secondly, and finally, there was no baseline data to perform a longitudinal study, perhaps since the inception of Shanghai Shenhua Football Club.

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Table 1 Demographic profile of the fans

Socio-demographic variables	%
Gender	
Male	89.4
Female	10.6
Total	100
Age	
17 and below	10.6
18-25	45.2
26-30	27.5
31-35	12.2
36-40	2.7
41-50	0.9
51-60	0.9
Total	100
Fan or non-fan (N=500)	
fan	90.2
Non-fan	5.2
Not sure	4.6
Total	100

Note : N=451

Table 2 Descriptive results of CSR items

CSR items	Mean	SD
1 Charity for poor	3.94	.884
2 Donation for disaster relief	3.82	.909
3 Charity for disabled	3.93	.923
4 Charity for autism children	3.80	.968
5 Charity for migrants' children	3.82	1.008
6 Grassroots football development	4.10	.892
7 Promotion of social inclusion	4.02	.904
8 Gender and racial equity	4.109	.9611
9 Creation of local jobs	3.90	.969
10 Local players development	3.98	1.051
11 Youth sports promotion	4.21	.924
12 Serving as models for young people	4.22	.892
13 Youth educational initiatives	4.12	.914
14 Youth health initiatives	3.94	.957
15 prevention of juvenile delinquency	3.82	1.004
16 Promotion of sports for all	3.93	1.000
17 Increase of sport participation	4.06	.961
18 Raising health awareness	3.98	.953
19 Promotion of healthy lifestyle	3.92	.987
20 Financial transparency	3.50	1.190
21 Healthy financial management system	3.66	1.127
22 Healthy corporate governance	3.78	1.103
23 Tax compliance	4.16	.947
24 healthy financial situation	4.01	1.046

25	Reducing the generation of waste	3.93	0.997
26	Resources Recycling	3.82	1.009
27	Use of renewable energy	3.96	.891
28	No pollution policy	3.99	.902
29	Use of green technology	4.06	.912
30	Fair game	4.44	.791
31	no doping policy	4.54	.715
32	no violence policy	4.40	.803
33	Honesty to consumers	4.23	.867
34	Improving fans satisfaction	4.16	.944
35	Food safety	4.16	.884
36	Safe working environment for employees	4.24	.858
37	Training and career development of employees	4.25	.804
38	Employees wellbeing	4.23	.876
39	Fair treatment to all employees	4.26	.911

Note: N=451 fans

Table 3 Factor structure and CSR variables

Factor Labels and Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	Common alities
Factor 1 – Public health							
14 Youth health initiatives	.601						.672
15 prevention of juvenile delinquency	.606						.605
16 Promotion of sports for all	.731						.728
17 Increase of sport participation	.726						.681
18 Raising health awareness	.731						.704
19 Promotion of healthy lifestyle	.702						.695
Factor 2 – Charity							
1 Charity for poor		.704					.653
2 Donation for disaster relief		.749					.686
3 Charity for disabled		.723					.670
4 Charity for autism children		.798					.735
5 Charity for migrants' children		.765					.710
Factor 3–CSR to customer and employee							
33 Honesty to consumers			.636				.659
34 Improving consumers' satisfaction			.648				.649
35 Food safety			.563				.576
36 Safe working environment for employees			.647				.624
37 Training and career development of employees			.708				.695
38 Employees wellbeing			.747				.724
39 Fair treatment to all employees			.731				.650

Factor 4 – Community development and youth education							
6 Grassroots football development				.525			.627
7 Promotion of social inclusion				.627			.654
8 Gender and racial equity				.567			.542
11 Youth sports promotion				.656			.675
12 Serving as models for young people				.667			.709
30 Fair play				.563			.542
Factor 5 –Economic and financial responsibility							
20 Financial transparency					.661		.730
21 Healthy financial management system					.703		.756
22 Healthy corporate governance					.656		.737
23 Tax compliance					.518		.564
24 healthy financial situation					.687		.694
Factor 6 – Environmental responsibility							
27 Use of renewable energy						.654	.713
28No pollution policy						.705	.766
29 Use of green technology						.685	.724
Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings	4.35 6	4.19 3	4.11 7	3.27 7	3.02 5	2.53 8	
Cronbach's Alpha	.900	.891	.886	.835	.857	.865	
Variance explained (%)	13.6 14	13.1 02	12.8 65	10.2 41	9.45 3	7.93 2	
Cumulative Variance explained	13.6 14	26.7 16	39.5 81	49.8 22	59.2 74	67.2 06	

Table 4 Regression analysis of perceived CSR factors on Intention to repeat purchase

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	4.914	.015		320.631	.000
Factor 4 – Community development and youth education	.076	.015	.225	4.969	.000
Factor 3–CSR to customer and employee	.059	.015	.174	3.842	.000
(R Square=.081; F=19.725, p=.000)					

Note: Dependent Variable: future spectatorship intention of professional football club

Table 5 Regression analysis of perceived CSR factors on intention to buy professional football team licensed products

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	4.812	.024		199.516	.000
Factor 3–CSR to customer and employee	.103	.024	.195	4.281	.000
Factor 4 – Community development and youth education	.087	.024	.163	3.591	.000
Factor 2 – Charity	.059	.024	.110	2.427	.016
(R Square=.077; F=12.371, p=.000)					

Note: Dependent Variable: intention to buy professional football club licensed products

Table 6 Regression analysis of perceived CSR factors on intention to recommend professional football team

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
Constant	4.907	.015		323.519	.000
Factor 3—CSR to customer and employee	.069	.015	.208	4.568	.000
Factor 4 – Community development and youth education	.057	.015	.170	3.731	.000

(R Square=.072; F=17.393, p=.000)

Note: Dependent Variable: intention to recommend professional football club to friends and family