

# Comparing the Service Quality of China Super League and English Premier League for Offline Game Experience

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**Abstract.** Football, the most popular sport worldwide, has approximately 3.5 billion fans. In addition, the service quality of different football leagues varies, and it significantly impacts fan attendance to football games offline. This paper focuses on comparing the service quality of the English Premier League (EPL) and the China Super League (CSL) to identify areas for improvement in CSL's offline game's attendance. The paper evaluated the service quality of the two leagues through four dimensions: program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality, and environment quality. The results show that the EPL is better at offering more games, greater interaction quality due to effective safety policies, higher player market value that led to more competitive matches, and more professional and modern football stadiums. In comparison, less games, excessively stringent security regulations that detract from the spectator experience, lesser player market value, and subpar stadium infrastructure plague the CSL. The research concludes that for CSL to enhance its service quality, it should allow more teams to play in CSL, relax some security policies, adjust its salary caps and foreign player policies, and build more professional football stadiums. These improvements are crucial for boosting fan attendance and engagement, ultimately enhancing the league's marketability and revenue. Future research should explore service quality in other global football leagues to provide a more comprehensive understanding of service quality's impact on attendance.

**Keywords:** Football leagues, Service quality, CSL, EPL.

## 1. Introduction

Football, the most popular sport globally, has approximately 3.5 billion fans worldwide. In addition to the well-known World Cup, almost all the countries have their football leagues. Local football clubs have chances to play in different levels of football leagues, and it creates markets for these teams. Many football clubs around the world have huge market values. According to Brand Finance, Manchester City, England's football club, has a market value of 1.726 billion USD in 2024 [1]. Also, these markets provide huge revenues to these brands. According to Deloitte, Manchester City had a revenue of 825.9 million euros in the 23/24 season [2]. Many of these football teams have great impact even in other countries. For example, Manchester City's official Weibo (Chinese social media) account has 9.7 million followers.

China Super League (CSL), on the other hand, did not operate as well as other leagues in the world. Many teams are now facing financial challenges. For instance, Guangzhou FC, one of the most successful Chinese football clubs, was on the verge of bankruptcy at the beginning of this year and urgently started to sell its merchandise on TikTok before barely making it through to League One (Chinese second-level football league). Other teams, such as Hebei FC, Dalian FC, and Shenzhen FC, directly dissolved after they fell from the CSL. At the same time, CSL is also having problems resonating with sports fandoms. CSL's official account on Chinese TikTok only has approximately 0.5 million followers. This is much less compared to the other leagues, such as England's Premier League, which has about 4.37 million followers on Chinese TikTok.

China has the greatest population in the world; therefore, in theory, it should have the greatest potential market among all other countries, and more people should be watching football games offline. However, the poor operational state of CSL and its low average attendance rate do not seem to utilize its potential sports market well. The average attendance for the CSL 2023 season was only about 20k people per game; on the other hand, the English Premier League (EPL) has about 40k

people per game, which is almost double the attendance of CSL. The way for CSL to improve its offline game attendance has become one of the main problems that it needs to solve.

Some past studies focused on the service quality of football tourism [3]. Others analyzed the effects of service quality on other sports [4]. However, few of them analyzed the service qualities provided by football leagues and its effects on game attendances. Therefore, this essay will analyze and compare the service quality of EPL and CSL from different dimensions, and then give suggestions for CSL to improve its service quality.

## **2. EPL**

### **2.1. History of EPL**

England, as the creator of modern football, established its football leagues in the 19th century. English Football League (EFL) was formed in 1888, initially containing only 12 football teams. In 1892, the second division of EFL was formed. As time went on, more and more level leagues were created and the number of teams participating in the EFL grew. However, entering the 1980s, several events happened such as the Heysel Stadium Disaster, a conflict between Liverpool fans and Juventus fans, which implicated that if the English football league wanted to rebirth, radical reform of the league would be needed. Therefore, in 1992, EPL was formed by the first-division clubs and broke from EFL. It is an individual league that operates by itself instead of EFL. This laid the foundation for its successful further marketing.

Nowadays, 20 clubs are playing in the EPL. The last 3 teams will be relegated to the first-division league of the EFL, and the top 7 teams may have opportunities to play in the Union of European Football Associations' leagues in the next season. Most of the teams in EPL were formed in the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, which have hundreds of years of history.

### **2.2. Service Quality Analysis of EPL**

Service quality is a critical determinant of customer satisfaction and loyalty. It refers to how well a service meets or exceeds customer expectations. Service quality in offline sports events background was defined by many dimensions: program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality, and environment quality [5]. A higher service quality in football games refers to higher consumer satisfaction, and it will enhance consumer loyalty. Therefore, service quality is a crucial aspect that football leagues need to consider while they are planning their marketing plans since they need to attract more fans and spectators.

#### **2.2.1. Program quality**

The program quality of soccer leagues can be defined by the schedule of the games [5]. There are 20 teams in EPL, and since each team needs to compete with all other teams for 2 matches, home and away, each team needs to play 38 games per season. Therefore, there are 380 EPL games in total played every year. Despite the league games, all the EPL teams also need to participate in the EFL Cup and the FA Cup. This increases the total game number that a team needs to play to approximately 42 games. This gives its fans more options of dates to choose to watch football games, and it also increases the intensity of the schedule. The EPL games were spread from October to next year's May, and the kickoff time of the games was spread from 12:30 to 20:00 (British time). This schedule enabled fans around the world to find a suitable time to watch these football games online instead of waking up at midnight.

#### **2.2.2. Interaction quality**

The interaction quality of a football game can reflect the most on the service provided by the security guards [5]. EPL's safe security policies and its safety management ensured that all fans could safely watch the game offline. After a few violent incidents happened in the last century, the Government's Guide to Safety (Green Guide) at Sports Grounds was published to, and prevent

violence in football stadiums. The Green Guide requires every football club in the top four divisions in England to have a stadium safety officer, who is responsible for all the viewers coming to watch the games [6]. Moreover, many other regulations for the spectators were also published. These policies solved most of the safety problems in EPL. They boosted the consumers' confidence in the stadium's safety, attracting more people to watch football games offline. In the 1985/1986 season, the total attendance of all the football clubs in England for the whole year was only 16 million people. However, these days, with better security laws in place, the average attendance increased to about 30 million people.

### **2.2.3. Outcome quality**

The outcome quality of offline football games can be evaluated by the intensiveness and the result of the game [5]. The value of a player indicates how good he plays and his potential, usually a higher market value means the player is better or more popular. According to the transfer market, EPL has a total player value of 11.7 billion euros, which is the highest market value among all the leagues in the world [7]. Thus, there are more popular players playing in the EPL than in other leagues, and the intensity of the matches is higher. Also, the differences between teams in the EPL are smaller compared to other leagues. Low-ranking teams can sometimes win those high-ranking teams. This made the result of the games very uncertain, which increased people's interest in watching the EPL.

### **2.2.4. Environment quality**

The environment quality of a football game refers to the experience of the game provided by the football stadium [5]. All the teams participating in the EPL have their professional football stadiums, which are stadiums with no running tracks surrounding the football field. Also, due to the Green Book policies, there are no more standing seats in any football stadium in the EPL. Also, many football clubs decided to renovate their stadiums or even build new ones. In season 2023/2024, the average capacity of the football stadiums in the EPL was about 40 thousand people. Better amenities and technological innovations in modern stadiums increase the entire fan experience. Attending live events is made more comfortable and pleasurable by features like improved food selections, faster entrance processes, and greater connectivity [8]. These created a better watching experience for the viewers who come to watch the games offline. Therefore, an increasing amount of people were attracted to watch EPL games offline.

Overall, EPL managed to improve its service quality through different dimensions. This increased the popularity of the brand and therefore made more people come to watch games offline. The improvement in service quality thus enhanced the consumer loyalty to the brand.

## **3. CSL**

### **3.1. History of CSL**

The history of the Chinese professional football league can only be traced back to 1994. Before that, all the football teams in China were controlled by local football associations and state enterprises, such as the Locomotive Team under the Ministry of Railways. In 1992, the Chinese Football Association decided to marketize the football clubs; therefore, they created the first Chinese professional football league to accomplish that goal. At first, the professional league was called the Jia-A-Lauge. However, entering the 20th century, Jia A League's reputation plummeted due to many match-fixing events. People started to lose confidence in the Jia-A League just as the EFL in the 1980s. The Chinese Football Association then decided to model on the British approach. They recreated a new league named China Super League to replace the original Jia-A League. This successfully saved the reputation of Chinese football leagues. These days, 16 teams are playing in the CSL. Only the top 3 teams can participate in the AFC championship league next season.

## **3.2. Service Quality Analysis of CSL**

### **3.2.1. Program quality**

CSL contains 16 teams in total, each of these teams needs to play 2 matches against other teams, home and away. Thus, there are only 240 games played each season. Unlike many other leagues in the world, CSL uses a schedule that does not span the year. That is, the match will start and end in the same year. CSL's games start in March and end in November. During the season, the team will participate in the CFA Cup, which will increase the average total matches played by each team to 32 games. The kickoff times of CSL are from 15:00 to 20:00. However, most of the games are set to start around 18:00 to 20:00. Therefore, it gives the viewer's less flexibility in choosing the time to watch the games.

### **3.2.2. Interaction quality**

China has a relatively low crime rate compared to England. Similarly, the security policies of football stadiums are also strict. Unlike many European leagues, whose stadiums can be almost full when there is a game, CSL does not allow football clubs to open all seats to the spectators. The first three rows of some professional football stadiums in the CSL are closed to anyone, such as Workers' Stadium and Pudong Football Stadium. Also, according to the policy, every football stadium needs to have "buffer zones" between away team spectators and other spectators, so normally the football stadiums will not be full. For example, Chengdu's Phoenix Hill Sports Park has a maximum capacity of 60,000 people, and Chengdu has a huge soccer market, all the tickets for soccer games are sold in a second. However, due to the policies, the average attendance for that stadium in the 2024 season is only around 40,000 people [9]. Other than seating policies, CSL also has other security policies. The security regulations impose very strict restrictions on the types of amusement activities in the vicinity of the stadium and the sale of merchandise in the stadium. Most stadiums currently do not allow the sale of food items such as hamburgers and meatloaf, on the grounds that they can be thrown far. These strict security policies indeed ensured the spectators' safety. However, the spectators coming to watch the game may not have very pleasant experiences.

### **3.3.3. Outcome quality**

CSL used to have a period when many famous international players such as Fellaini came to the league, it was called "Golden Dollar Football". However, that period ended shortly after the new wage restriction policies were published. Nowadays, CSL is losing the attraction to many good football players in the world. The total market value of the players in CSL in the 2024 season is only 139.1 million euros [10]. Therefore, the average ability of the players in CSL is lower than many other leagues in the world. Also, the policy published was an important factor influencing CSL's intensity. In 2024, CSL only allows 5 foreign players to enter the player list of the game [11]. Foreign players are decisive factors in the intensity and the outcome of the games. Therefore, the regulation of foreign players restricted the intensity of the games. However, the results of the CSL games are relatively more uncertain. In the last 5 years, 5 different teams won the champion of CSL. Therefore, although CSL's average intensity is lower, but the fierce competition for the champion can still attract some spectators.

### **3.3.4. Environment quality**

China's first professional football stadium was created in the 21st century. Unlike other countries, the Chinese government did not make building professional football stadiums a top priority before. Therefore, in 2024, there are only 12 professional football stadiums in China, and in CSL, only 6 teams out of 16 teams have professional football stadiums. Other teams are all using multi-purpose stadiums, which are stadiums with tracks. Thus, the multi-purpose stadiums will have a relatively bad experience for the spectators compared to the professional football stadiums.

There are still many improvements CSL can make in improving its service quality compared to some other leagues in the world. These improvements may be crucial to increase the fan loyalty of CSL.

## **4. Comparing the Two Leagues**

### **4.1. Comparison of the Service Quality**

The EPL and CSL have a big difference in their service quality. Comparing these differences can help to give suggestions to improve CSL's service quality and therefore increase the brand influence of CSL.

#### **4.1.1. Comparing program quality**

There are only 240 league games played in a CSL season. In contrast, there are 360 games played in an EPL season. The number of games played in CSL is less than  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the games played in EPL. Therefore, people will have fewer choices of dates to watch CSL games. CSL should create more games to meet the fans' requirements.

#### **4.1.2. Comparing interaction quality**

EPL has strict security policies to protect the stadium's safety. By far the security policies do effectively prevent violence from happening in football stadiums, and at the same time, it minimizes the negative effect those policies have on the spectators' experiences. Similarly, CSL also has strict security policies. However, compared to the EPL policies, CSL's policies are unnecessarily strict, and they harm the watching game experiences of the viewers. Some policies such as banning hamburgers are needless.

#### **4.1.3. Comparing outcome quality**

The total player market value of EPL is about 84 times the total player market value of CSL. This huge difference between the player market value indicates that CSL is not gaining popularity worldwide, and the famous players are not coming to CSL. The missing of these good players will affect the overall intensity of the games and therefore will affect the outcome quality of CSL.

#### **4.1.4. Comparing environment quality**

The use of professional football stadiums is a crucial factor affecting CSL's environment quality. Using multi-purpose stadiums will heavily increase the distance between the spectators and the field. Compared to EPL, in which all the teams have their professional football stadiums, only half of the teams in CSL have professional football stadiums. This damaged the environment quality of CSL and decreased the number of spectators coming to watch the game offline.

## **4.2. Suggestions**

Overall, a few suggestions can be made to solve the gap between CSL and EPL's service qualities.

CSL can expand the number of teams in the league to increase the number of games played every season. For example, increasing the number of teams to 18 can add an additional 66 games to the season. This will not only provide more games for the fans to choose to watch the game, but also it will increase the intensity of the schedule. A more intense schedule will add more considerations to the team managers, such as thinking about how to arrange the starting players so the players will not feel tired after a series of games. Therefore, it will enhance both the program quality and outcome quality.

CSL should relax those stadium policies to increase the interaction quality. More entertaining activities near and in the stadium should be allowed while the stadiums are safe. Outside the stadium, before and after the game, CSL can organize some league-related events to increase the brand popularity, and at the same time, it can make the spectators' experience better by having more entertainment. Inside the stadium, more food should be provided to the spectators.

CSL's game quality can be improved by attracting more good foreign players. To do this, CSL should liberalize its foreign player policy and its salary restriction policy. More foreign players should be allowed to play in the league and therefore increase the intensity of the games. And a higher salary can attract more foreign players to play in CSL. This can thus increase the outcome quality of CSL.

The Chinese government should accelerate the building procedure of professional soccer stadiums, and all the football teams in CSL should have their professional football stadiums. Professional football stadium's viewing experience will be better than multi-purpose stadiums. Therefore, more people will be attracted to watch football games offline.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the service quality of CSL and EPL can be compared by 4 dimensions: program quality, interaction quality, outcome quality, and environment quality. For program quality, CSL has relatively fewer games than EPL, which did not give the spectators many choices to watch the games. For the interaction quality, CSL is too strict on its security policy compared to EPL, which harms its interaction quality. For outcome quality, the average ability of CSL players is lower than EPL players, so it makes the outcome quality of CSL low. For environment quality, CSL does not have a lot of professional football stadiums, which means the spectators' experiences in watching CSL games offline are worse than EPL. A few suggestions are given to CSL for it to improve its service quality. Firstly, CSL can expand the number of teams in the league, therefore there will be more games played each season. Moreover, CSL should relax its security policy appropriately while maintaining security, thus the interaction quality can be improved. Thirdly, CSL ought to relax its policies on foreign players and pay caps. By doing this, more foreign players will be attracted, and they will increase the intensity of CSL. Lastly, the Chinese government should build more professional football stadiums that provide good watching experience for the spectators to increase the environment quality.

The significance of this paper is to compare the service quality between the CSL and other leagues, to give suggestions in favor of the development of the CSL. More people will be attracted to watch football games offline, and it can boost the ticket revenue of CSL teams. This paper will be beneficial to the CSL operators and future researchers on this topic. It fills the gap of no previous analysis of the service quality of football leagues. However, this passage mainly focused on the service quality of CSL and Premier League, there are still many other leagues in the world whose service quality can be evaluated. Future research should focus on evaluating and comparing the service quality of other leagues. Only after evaluating their service qualities, people can make sure the most crucial factors affecting the game attendance.

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