

Chinese Super League: Missing Out Aspects on Service Quality and Brand Equity

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Abstract. Chinese sports market gained tremendous attention in recent days as China held the 2022 Winter Olympic Games successfully. However, in contrast to other sports markets, the attention given to the Chinese Super League (CSL), the top-division soccer league in China, seems to have decreased catastrophically. The CSL was once popular among the public in its golden era but met a recession in recent years. Service quality and brand equity were two of the major factors that directly influenced spectators' experiences in the western market, followed by previous studies. The study from Grönroos suggests that service quality has three dimensions: functional, technical, and image. The study from Keller suggests that brand equity was built by consumers based on their knowledge and experience of a brand. From former empirical research, it is unsure if those models fit different occasions in China, and whether the depression of the CSL can be explained by the missing aspects of service quality and brand equity. The results from review actions by CSL revealed that both thrive of the CSL and the recession of the CSL followed by brand equity and service quality model. Meanwhile, several suggestions have been raised based on the two models that can be implemented to help the CSL out of catastrophe.

Keywords: Chinese Super League, Sports Marketing, Soccer, Service Quality, Brand Equity.

1. Introduction

As the year 2022 passed, the Chinese Super League (CSL) also finished its' 2022 season. The former dominator club, ex-league champion Guangzhou F.C. relegated to CFA China League [1]. On the other side of the league table, last year's newly promoted club, Wuhan Three Towns won the title as their upcoming rival Tianjin Teda and Beijing Guoan withdrew and automatically gives a win to Wuhan Three Towns due to the 'injury and healthy problem' [2]. To conclude the 2022 season of the Chinese Super League, started with mockeries and ended with a mess. As teams were dismissed at the beginning of the season, the unpaid wages problem continued throughout the whole season [3], and teams won games without competition [2]. Bad news not only happened in the 2022 season but also appeared in previous seasons. The result of continuous negative news leads to the decline of public attention, decrease in the league's reputation, and collapse of the league's market value. However, before 2019, especially from 2011 to 2018, it was opposite to current circumstances. At this period, CSL was experiencing a golden era that attracted many spectators and fans. During this time, fans enjoyed the atmosphere and team performance, at the same time willing to consume authentic merchandise, go to the stadium to watch games, and build team identification. The flourish is not limited to local fans but foreign fans as well. It is prevalent to see fans from different countries show up at the stadium with CSL teams jersey and be part of a fantastic vibe. With the fans coming into the stadium and skilled players signed, the CSL became an international and high-performance league with a prominent market value from 2011-2018. With the top ten teams achieving an average \$130 million market value, broadcast contracts expanded from only \$13 million in 2015 to five years new deal worth 1.3billion. Many teams were owned or invested by billionaires, and China's top two domestic leagues spent a combined \$430 million in the transfer market [4]. However, as the capital was withdrawn and the effect of covid, the CSL experienced a terrible decadent. To detailed explain, the capital invested in CSL was majorly real-estate companies. They were once flushed with cash due to the industry boom and deemed investing in soccer as a way to curry favor with the government. But the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the "de-corporatization" of club names

crushed investors' desire. Therefore, even teams like Jiangsu Suning F.C. who won the 2020 league championship, ceased in 2021 [5]. Unlike leagues in Europe like Premier League, La Liga, etc., the CSL did not revive during the post covid pandemic period. There should be some aspects that the CSL missed out in its overall strategies, which constrain and encumber the revitalization of the league. Since there is meager research has been done on the recent decline of the CSL. This paper will deeply investigate the innate and intrinsic reasons why the CSL have once so successful but soon declined and raise suggestions that can be implemented to help league revival.

Both analysis and suggestions will be based on the theoretical framework of consumer-based brand equity [6], and service quality [7]. For the analysis, this paper will examine the success and failure of the CSL based on concepts. The suggestion will be raised to complement the missing aspects of concepts of the CSL. The meaning of this research is to 1) examine the feasibility of previous research, 2) identify the aspects that the CSL missed out on, and 3) designate the possible implementations for CSL to resurgence.

2. Fundamental Knowledge of Chinese Super League

2.1. Brand History

The Chinese Super League was first established in 2004, it is a re-branding product from the former top-division soccer league of China (Jia-A league). The reasons that the Chinese Football Association (CFA) wished to apply this re-branding was because of the notorious reputation of Jia-A, since the negative reputation led to the damage of games' watching value and league's credibility.

The results of the re-branding were succussed. Team numbers expanded to sixteen teams in its early years and expanded into eighteen teams in 2022. As the CSL entered its golden era (2011-2018), most clubs started to hire experienced managers from Europe. At the same time, as sponsors invested their money into clubs, clubs improved their training system, gym, and rehabilitation facilities. Those improvements in club infrastructure attracted skilled players who have a high demand for the proficiency of the team. The bad reputation of gambling and game fixing was also mitigated as the public observed the improvement that the CSL has made. However, the good time did not last long; as previously mentioned, the economic decline and pandemic led to capital withdrawal from the league and teams gradually. Players were forced to play in the bubble with no spectators at the stadium, and the league system changed from the league to Group Stage plus tournament. The joint of previously listed problems caused the CSL again has been symbolized as a lack of management, game fixing, and lousy performance in recent days.

2.2. Positive Factors

As previously gone through the CSL's history, it is reasonable to find that CSL has once thrived due to capital investment. This section will testify if the factors causing the CSL's flourish fit the theory of Brand Equity and Service Quality theoretical framework.

Based on Keller, brand equity is defined as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand and is built based on the creation of a brand, including its name, logo, and symbol. Keller also mentioned that establishing brand awareness and a "positive brand image" (i.e., Favorable, strong, and unique brand associations) in consumer memory creates different types of customer-based brand equity, depending on what marketing mix element is under consideration [6]. For the other aspects, Grönroos defined service quality as dependent on expected service and perceived service. The expectation of the consumers was influenced by consumers' image of the company [7]. And Koo's research suggested several components that service quality work in the sports industry, including service delivery which is the functional quality (i.e., Spectator-employee interaction). Service environment is functional quality, and service product which is the technical quality (i.e., good coaches, athletes, opponents) [8]. To measure whether the CSL's success reached the framework, this paper will provide actions that have been done by teams in the league, then point out if the action is suitable to theories.

Firstly, through CSL's Golden Era, various clubs were able to sign both skilled and renowned players. In this case, both service quality and brand equity improved as star players inflated the technical quality and their reputation built a strong brand awareness that connected CSL to high-level competition. The subsequence is the increase in attendance. Due to the improvement of technical quality plus brand awareness, fans were more willing to watch star players with higher performance games. The data shows that the average attendance number of CSL games increased from 14,000 to 24,100 gradually from 2010-2018, the highest of all time in CSL history [9]. With the increment in attendance, the service environment, which is the atmosphere of the stadium improved unintentionally by fans. Meanwhile, as those elements augmented, the revenue and market value of CSL also increased at the bargaining table. Consequently, CSL signed soccer legend David Beckham as league ambassador, after the contract ended with Beckham CSL negotiated another soccer legend Pavel Nedved as Beckham's successor [10]. The media coverage also met a boom as CSL sold its media coverage to China Sports Media (CSM) with a contract of 11 billion RMB and 10 years long in total [11]. Except for the domestic broadcasting program, CSL also cooperates with the International Management Group (IMG) on international TV broadcasting and now broadcasting in 96 countries [12]. The expansion of media coverage promoted the overall brand equity both domestically and internationally. The action, including sign star players, famous ambassadors, and media coverage, improved both brand equity and service quality.

Secondly, in 2021 CSL banned club sponsor names and re-location rights [13]. This is the idea raised during the Golden Era and implemented during the recession. The policy is: clubs can only use a neutral name that includes no sponsor's name, and the name cannot be changed even if there is an ownership change. Some teams kept their name due to history and fans' protests [14]. This is helpful to delight die-hard fans who were more orthodox and built an emotional attachment to the name of teams. For the re-location policy, the CSL team was only allowed re-location among the same provinces. The establishment of those two policies may encumber future business activities but create a sense of belonging to the fans. Based on Hunt et.al, fans can be classified as a temporary fan, local fan (derives satisfaction because they associate some element of the consumptive sports object with a local, geographic aspect), devoted fan (seeking particular personality on team, league, sport), the fanatical fan (emotional intensify about personality or team), and the dysfunctional fan, all types of the fan were interchangeable [15]. Therefore, those two policies can increase the percentage of local, devoted, and fanatical fans who are the major consumer of the sports industry. At the same time, their satisfaction has less connection to winning but attachment. As previously mentioned, service quality was determined by expected service from customers, and brand equity was influenced by one's image of a team. The policy of neutral name and province re-location changed fans' attention from winning to attachment, fans' expectations over the league will be more stable and will affect less by game results and have a positive brand image since teams now represent a geographical area instead of a company. Thus, service quality and brand equity were gained increased before the decline caused by the pandemic.

Thirdly, the CSL enhanced the sustainability of clubs, and established a wage cap and transfer cost limitation. The target, in general, is to control team costs lower than 600 million RMB annually, the average wage of domestic players cannot be over 3 million RMB and the highest player cannot be over 5 million RMB; for foreign players, the player cannot have a wage over 3 million Euros and the wage of foreign players in total cannot surplus of 10 million Euros, if violated, there will be a points deduction punishment on the league table [16]. For transfer cost limitation, the policy is if a player costs clubs over a certain price, that team should pay the same among of tax to the youth development department. Domestic players are 20 million RMB, and 45 million RMB for foreign players [16]. The wage gap and transfer cost limitation did entail the money cost for teams and helping change the CSL's brand awareness from short-vision, vulgar rich into a league that cares about long-term development.

3. Investigation and Implementation

3.1. Missing Out Aspects

As previously indicated, the blossom of CSL can be explained by the improvement of brand equity and service quality led by capital investment and strategies. However, some strategies hurt the benefit of sponsors and decreased the money invested. The outcome of service quality dropped due to the resignation of star players, and the wage cap caused teams can only recruit lower-level players. The brand equity also decreased as capital withdrawal from the league with unpaid wages and team dismissal. Since strategies have gains and losses, the theory about sports business is not a dichotomy as well. It is difficult to conclude that strategies damaged brand equity and service quality because there are similar strategies implemented in the NBA, one of the most successful sports leagues. Therefore, it is necessary to find out missing out aspects of the CSL which caused an unhealthy league system - a system depends on money invested too much and is not profitable enough to afford the expense. The unhealthy league system led to a financial crisis. As journalist Feng Zhen mentioned, "nearly every club in the league is experiencing severe cash flow problems" [17]. To support suggestions, this paper will point out missing out aspects that caused the league's recession based on brand equity theory and service quality theory, then raise suggestions. The research based on two models shows that CSL missed aspects of fan experience, positive brand equity, and social connection.

First of all, CSL had limited stable service quality during the recession as technical quality reversed with the resignation of star players. The fan experience is a type of service quality that is perceived by fans [7]. Also, service quality in sports includes products, delivery, and environment [8]. During the pandemic, the team was forced to play in the bubble. No spectators were allowed at the stadium, and they have had no income from ticket sales for over two years [17]. This is a huge impairment for team income as compared to the NBA's ticket income percentage of 22.38% [18]. Meanwhile, the experience for fans was terrible since fans were not able to watch games at the stadium. However, even before the pandemic, the overall fan experience was mediocre, due to the disadvantage of environmental and functional quality, especially facility aesthetics and food services. The major reasons causing unsatisfactory experience is the terrible vision of the stadiums and high capacity but low attendance rate. A huge multi-functional stadium is available for events like athletics, football, soccer, and concert. The outer track will prolong the distance between spectators and the field, and spectators will rarely feel the atmosphere better since the sound was disrupted. In CSL there are many huge stadiums, which is reasonable due to the huge population, however, have no boost to CSL since spectator numbers are not as huge as they should be. Take Guangzhou F.C. as an example. They were once the greatest team in CSL history, 8 times league titles, and two times Asian Football Championship (AFC) champions, as Hunt et.al. mentioned that sports fan is basking in reflected glory [15]. It is reasonable to assume they have a great number of fans. But the highest average attendance rate is 85% in 2018, which is comparatively lower than teams like middle-ranked team Newcastle United 2018, which have a similar size of the stadium with Guangzhou F.C. but a 97.7% attendance rate [9]. The comparison of Guangzhou Tianhe Stadium and St.James Park Stadium shows that the stadium with fabulous vision and aesthetic beauty. Those advantages helped St. James Stadium become a totem-like object for New Castle United supporters. The other negative factors for service quality are the high food/beverage price (the price for a bottle of water was doubled as the consumer can purchase in a convenience store) and limited food offered due to the historically violent event that fans throw food into the stadium. The stadium experience may not hurt that much when the league was at its peak, but once the performance decreased, there will be a disastrous decline in attendance because if the performance cannot attract spectators and fans back to the stadium, there are no other factors left that can call back fans and spectators since the stadium experience, facilities and aesthetic were poor.

Secondly, the brand equity of the CSL is far from comprehensive, though the CSL was once renowned as star players, increased fan attachment, and removed the stereotype of vulgar rich, the notorious reputation for game fixing, gambling, poor performance, and team dismissal keeps existing,

at the same time, visual design was considered unremarkable and ugly. For jerseys, the CSL signed a contract with Nike for 400 million dollars, ten years, and established one new jersey for all teams at CSL [19]. It seems alright, however, the jerseys were the same with different team icons, or similar patterns but different colors. The visual identity of the CSL did not create positive brand equity for fans to recognize the club as a brand. The deal, compared to MLS's contract with Adidas of 700 million dollars, six years, seems far more profitable for the CSL [20]. It created a negative circle that fans don't like the design of jerseys, they may rather buy fake jerseys, and Nike cannot earn a profit, then Nike will not invest in design better jerseys. Except for jerseys, there are also surfeit factors that hurt brand equity. The overall unpleasantness of Chinese soccer gives that CSL did not have certain causal fans and spectators, rather public would like to mock and deride CSL for fun. Despite the earlier years that CSL dealt with game fixing and gambling well, followed by the years of downward there were again unfair game cases revealed. For example, former national team, Wuhan Yangze F.C. coach, Li Tie was under investigation for suspected serious violations of discipline and law [21]. He was once in the 2022 Qatar World Cup broadcast team but has not shown up in any match's commentator seats. At the same time, many matches were canceled, which made CSL lose its technical quality worsen.

Thirdly, the CSL has limited social connections with its fans and spectators. This is the combination of service quality and brand equity, since tools including social networks and how services provider interact with customers, and the lack of a limited gateway in social media results public cannot have full-scale knowledge about the league. In the earlier 2022, CSL and its corporate IT company finished the website running contract, and CSL needed to find a new third-party organization for designing and running its application and official website with a 1 million and 800 thousand RMB budget [22]. However, its already passed a whole year, the progress is still unclear at this stage. At the same time, it allowed uncertificated media to spread its mockeries freely and damaged brand equity.

3.2. Implementations

While there are plenty of implementations that could be set to improve all aspects of CSL, this paper highly suggests CSL put priority on the previously mentioned aspects that they are missing out on. The implementations that this paper recommended is based on research introduced before, which require the CSL to improve its overall stadium facilities and food services to provide a better fan experience, re-design jerseys, focus on risk management that minimizes the scandals' negative effect, and build online fans interaction gateway.

First of all, provide a better fan experience by encouraging clubs to have a soccer focus stadium, which could be bought, built, or rented by clubs, or encourage clubs to improve stadium design with better vision, sound-absorbing effect and light system, since in many cases a soccer focus stadium is not a multifunctional building which normally has not been considered as required city infrastructure. Once the ownership of the stadium belongs to the club, clubs can sell the stadium's name sponsorship to create profits for the team's business. Teams like Shanghai Port already have soccer focus stadium properties and sold stadium name sponsorship with SAIC and named their stadium SAIC Pudong Stadium [23]. It is predictable that if CSL encourages clubs to offer soccer focus stadium, or remodification stadium, there will be much better experiences for fans in environmental quality including facility aesthetic, seat comfort and ambient condition as stadiums will have better sound collection effects. At the same time, CSL needs to help set a reasonable price for beverages and food depending on the economic level among various cities, in transforming soccer games more friendly to spectators from all social classes. Meanwhile, abolish the food ban, so that offers a party-like atmosphere for casual fans with friends, families, and couples, instead of building a barrier to segment spectators and fans. This is the most important factor among implementations since once there is great experience afforded, the casual fans will be enchanted and keep purchasing tickets, which could create considerable revenue even though they may buy less merchandise against fans.

The second implementation is to improve brand equity through multi-dimensions. For one thing, the CSL and its' team should re-negotiate with Nike on jersey design, as visual identity is significant for the creation of brand equity. Clubs in the Chinese Super League should take the initiative to offer design inspiration that shows the team's uniqueness to Nike. Avoiding the same designs across other teams, implying some teams' traits on the jersey, and keeping consistency is important for the public to recognize such a team as a symbol. For example, when people talk gold and purple, then the Lakers will come to mind. However, compared to European teams with a longer history than Chinese, the priority of jersey design is to keep consistency and create its own heritage instead of chasing aesthetic aspects, since the trendiest design may become unpopular, but history heritage will long last. By doing this, as generation by generation, public will recognize a team by their fundamental jersey design and color scheme. Other than regular home and away jersey that which normally restricted with limited change every year, the CSL can cooperate with Nike to have special edition jerseys for certain teams that involve culture and geographical identity in special edition jerseys. For other sides of brand equity, this paper suggests the CSL design a new promotion slogan while punishing and avoiding game fixing and gambling. The new promotion slogan is needed to have a positive meaning and refresh the public's stereotype of CSL to overhaul the league's reputation. The target is to find a promotion like NBA's "where amazing happens", which saved NBA from violent events, and gambling scandals and demonstrated a new impression for consumers. Meanwhile, the CSL also needs to expand its punishment on players, coaches, managers, and referees who participated in game fixing to avoid further damage to the league's reputation.

The last implementation is to prompt CSL to find a collaborative IT company to build up a new official website and mobile application. Since service qualities were not only limited to face-to-face service but also online user interface. While the website and application should not be limited to basic functions like status, league, and news. It should also include access to an online shop, a season pass, and most importantly newcomer fans guidebook. Since the website will be the gateway to fans and spectators, it is important to vanish the barrier between fans and spectators/causal fans. This guidebook can contain basic knowledge of soccer, how to watch games in different seasons, how to enjoy certain areas' food, etc. Via introduces a good experience for first-time spectators, it is a rationale for them to come back and also bring their friends into the games. An online website can also be a platform for fans to have conversations and share their moment, and CSL can select some of their stories and give them gifts.

4. Conclusions

By measuring the history and current circumstances of the CSL, this paper finds out that the once prosperity of the CSL matched the framework of brand equity and service quality. The fiscal investment in the league as a whole raised the overall brand equity and service quality, thus, leading to a golden era. However, as the monetary factors withdraw from the league, there are several missing aspects revealed in brand equity and service quality, even at its peak but overshadowed by the surface thriving. Therefore, it is essential for the CSL to know the limitations of the league and design a clear blueprint to improve its future appearance because of the end of the golden era and the necessity to construe sustainable development for the league. The research has shown that the CSL missed aspects of both service quality and brand equity in various detailed elements. This paper highly suggests that the CSL set priorities on improving the fan experience, building positive brand awareness, and creating social connection since those elements were the foundation of brand equity and service quality. To complement the missing-out aspects, the CSL needs to encourage clubs to enhance their stadium facilities, rebuild the league's brand equity, and speed up the website process as soon as possible. By making all the suggestions, the CSL will have fair possibility complement missed-out aspects over brand equity and service quality, at the same time, achieve a more stable remuneration, and league performance and avoid roller-coaster-like economic circumstances.

However, the review and suggestion were based on league level, which means this paper has not covered the all detailed aspects of each team, since each club in the CSL have located in different cities, and provinces across the Chinese mainland with diverse economic, cultural, ethnic, and traditions that have great influence over sports marketing strategies, which subsequent work needs to be implied with teams separately or teams should doing rigorous research before implementing new marketing strategies. At the same time, as talked about basking the reflected glory, the overall soccer skills and performance were required to increase to attract the public's embrace other than marketing strategies, since extraordinary leagues like NBA or Premier League do have some wonderful marketing strategies in both domestic and foreign market, but it is important to remember that they are offering top-level sports competition.

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