

# Attendance of Active Football Fans in China: Evidence of a Survey Study

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## **Aim**

From the European perspective, Chinese football fans are basically perceived as a target demand market for the internationalisation of European top clubs focusing on the opportunities given by the large population and growing purchasing power. However, largely overlooked are the preferences and attitudes of the established fan base of the Chinese Super League (CSL). Therefore, this study analyses the determinants of (self-reported) stadium attendance of active fans of CSL clubs based on data of the first survey on frequent stadium attendees and season ticket holders (STH) in Chinese professional football. It is notably questioned whether dedicated supporters are still attached to the CSL or show (early) indications of alienation toward the increased commercialisation of the league governance as commonly found in European football (García & Welford, 2015).

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

It is only lately that the CSL and football fandom in China is studied in the international literature. For example, Qian et al. (2017) find that there is an overall lack of attention to and involvement with Chinese football and the CSL among Chinese youth. Watanabe and Soebbing (2017) show by regressions on aggregated attendance of the CSL that pricing is a less relevant determinant whereas rival teams and strong opponents significantly raise stadium demand. Gong et al. (2015) conducted the only available large survey (N=926) on Chinese football fans while attending matches. They focus on the relation between involvement as supporters and satisfaction with the CSL. The authors find a negative correlation between the investigated constructs which they attribute to repeated management failures within the CSL, such as corruption and match-fixing. Thus, there is certain resentment among Chinese fans about the current situation in the CSL. This finding and the generally scarce existing evidence underlines that more empirical research is needed on the relationship between attitudes and attendance behaviour of Chinese football fans. Moreover, Chinese domestic football has substantially gained in significance because the central government launched a strategic football plan aiming at an ambitious development of the sport. This is also relevant from the perspective of European football since the CSL has become a strong and active player on the international transfer market for top footballers (Liu, Zhang & Desbordes, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to have solid evidence to assess the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the Chinese football market.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

This study uses a questionnaire in Mandarin, the Chinese standard language, that was earlier tested on German football fans and measures fan identification, reported attendance, attitudes towards the league and club governance, behavioural intentions and sociodemographics. The data represent a cluster sample (N=453) which captures active fan groups of ten CSL clubs who were randomly interviewed outside the stadium gates at five league fixtures during the season 2017. (Ordered) logit/probit regressions are run on the self-reported attendance frequency and a 5-point (inverted) purchase scale asking whether the respondents “intend to attend less matches” in the stadium, considering model variants for robustness checks and a set of about 50 explanatory variables (full or item model) deduced from the questionnaire and a reduced factor model. The modelling follows a heterodox theoretical approach

operationalising economic demand theory, social theory on football fans (García & Welford, 2015) and (sport) consumer theory (McDonald, 2010).

### **Results and Discussion**

Overall, the evidence of the regression analysis is rather mixed and the robustness restricted. This may be interpreted against the background that the Chinese football market is still developing and that there have been severe governance problems of the CSL in the past. Therefore, the fans seem to be divided because they do not know yet in which direction the CSL will develop. However, diverse constructs of fan identification and attachment, such as past attendance and membership in a fan group, clearly prevent Chinese fans from attending less. Hence, with regard to the attendance intention, the critical results of Gong et al. (2015) cannot be confirmed. But there are some indications that younger fans (convexly curved in age) and STH may attend less in the future. Moreover, all else equal, criticism of commercialisation is a significant determinant of the intention to attend less.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

As in Europe (García & Welford, 2015), CSL fans are divided over increasing commercialisation, investor-owned clubs, governmental influences and the like. However, the extent of dissatisfaction with the commercialisation of Chinese football and the unanimity among fans on these issues is apparently lower than in European football. But CSL officials should take the concerns of their established fan base seriously and modernise the league with care for fan attitudes. Otherwise, they risk to be confronted with the same opposition of active fans “against modern football” as in Europe. Thus, the supporter and customer relationship management of the CSL should be further developed.

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