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Understanding Football Attendance and Willingness to Pay in China: Evidence from Consumer Preferences and Ticketing Demand

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Abstract. This study examines the determinants of match attendance intentions and willingness to pay (WTP) in China's professional football market, with particular attention to consumer engagement, match characteristics, income differences, and matchday experiences. Using survey data collected through the Wenjuanxing platform, the study analyzes responses from 216 participants. Spearman correlation analysis, Welch's t-tests, analysis of variance (ANOVA), logistic regression, and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression are employed to investigate consumer preferences and heterogeneity in ticket demand. The findings indicate that football interest, previous attendance experience, and emotional attachment to clubs are positively associated with future ticket purchase intentions. In terms of payment willingness, income and baseline ticket valuation are positively associated with WTP for regular tickets, derby premiums, and value-added matchday packages. Match attractiveness also influences attendance decisions, whereas preferences for online or television viewing are negatively associated with stadium attendance intentions. These findings highlight the importance of consumer segmentation, differentiated ticket pricing, fan engagement, and improved matchday experiences.

Keywords: Chinese Football Market, Match Attendance, Willingness to Pay, Consumer Preferences, Ticket Pricing

1. Introduction

Professional football has become one of the most commercially significant sports industries in China [1]. This is reflected not only in major professional competitions such as the Chinese Football Association Super League but also in Low-level league like China League One and China League Two [2]. The Chinese football league system is comprised of 3 fully professional divisions as mentioned earlier, with overall more than 60 clubs [2]. After a decade of high spending "golden yuan football" , during which clubs relying on their parent firm invest huge amount of money for attracting first-class foreign players in order to improve their performance immediately, the industry's has tend to become stable these years, with rationalized club investment, and structured long-term youth training development [3]. In the meantime, by the end of the 2025 season, 10 out of 16 CSL clubs play in professional football-specific stadiums, replacing the old multi-use stadiums

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with running tracks for other track and field events [4]. For example, Dalian Young Boy FC, a 2025 newly promoted CSL club, attracted a average of 58268 home fans every match with a 92% stadium occupancy rate , the highest average home attendance in Asia , and generated 45 million RMB of ticket revenue throughout the season, which is 50% more than its initial estimation [5]. While well performing clubs thrive in the market, many lower and middle-level teams haven't achieved similar success [3]. For instance, Wuhan Three Towns recorded only 9,880 average home audiences and a 17% occupancy rate in 2025, with ticket revenue far below the average of 36.3 million RMB per club [5, 6]. Understanding the factors that drive football attendance and fans' willingness to pay for match tickets — including cultural approvement with host cities, the match's attractiveness, and matchday service — is important for all clubs [7, 8]. Addressing these factors and reducing the gap between elite and small clubs can improve the long-term sustainability of the Chinese professional football market [7].

A substantial body of literature has examined consumer demand for professional sports. Ticket price, resident income level, rival teams, population, and income level, can influence attendance [9]. In detail, an increase in ticket prices will reduce the attendance rate of the competition and rival teams like whether it's a derby match or rivaling a strong team can elevate the attendance rate. When fixed effects are not controlled, the income level of the home team's region has a significant positive impact on the attendance rate. A similar pattern holds for population size: the population size of where the home team is based shows a notable positive effect on match attendance rate.

Another stream of research focuses on ticket pricing and revenue management in professional sports. The match's quality, the income level of local residents and many other factors influence ticket prices [8]. Matches involving highly successful teams, championship contenders, or traditional rivals with long-standing competitive histories typically command higher prices because consumers perceive greater entertainment value. Moreover, regional income levels and purchasing power shape clubs' pricing strategies, allowing teams located in wealthier markets to charge premium prices while maintaining demand. These findings suggest that attendance demand and ticket pricing are jointly determined by a common set of economic and sporting factors.

Despite the extensive study on sports demand and ticket pricing, relatively little evidence exists for the Chinese professional football market. Most existing studies focus on mature football leagues in Europe and America, where fan culture, market structure, and revenue models differ substantially from those in China. In terms of club operations, European leagues have well-established diversified revenue systems, whereas Chinese clubs long relied on heavy capital injection from parent firms and are only just transitioning to more sustainable financial models. Regarding the fan market, mature leagues benefit from decades of accumulated fan loyalty and ingrained match going traditions, while Chinese football audiences are still developing stable consumption habits and deep emotional bonds with local clubs. On top of that, the ongoing shift from multi-purpose stadiums to purpose-built football venues across China adds another layer of uniqueness, as it reshapes the on-site experience and fans' willingness to pay in ways not observed in mature markets. As Chinese professional football enters a period characterized by rationalized investment and standardized development, understanding how market characteristics, match attributes, and service-related factors jointly influence attendance and ticket prices becomes increasingly important.

This study investigates the determinants of professional football attendance intention and WTP in China using survey evidence from Chinese consumer. It examines how football interest, previous attendance experience, club attachment, income, price sensitivity, match characteristic, stadium quality and accessibility are associated with future ticket purchase and different WTP. Correlation analysis, t-tests, ANOVA, logistic regression and OLS regression are used to identify general

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patterns and consumer heterogeneity. The results show that football interest, prior attendance experience, and club attachment are closely related with ticket purchasing intention, whereas income, baseline ticket valuation and price sensitivity are more related to consumer WTP for regular tickets, derby matches and value added products.

This study has several contributions to existing research. First, it fills in a gap in current sports studies by providing targeted evidence from the Chinese professional football market, which has not been widely examined before. Second, it offers practical suggestions for league officials and club operators to improve ticketing plans and build steadier matchday income as the industry goes through structural adjustment. Third, by integrating attendance intentions with several measures of willingness to pay, the study provides a straightforward analytical framework that may also be applied to other rapidly developing professional sports markets.

The remaining parts of the paper are structured as follows. Section 2 presents the analytical framework. Section 3 introduces the research methodology, including data sources and the model. Section 4 reports the results and explains the main findings. Section 5 presents the managerial implications and concludes the study.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework explains professional football attendance as a binary consumer choice under utility maximization. Individual i compares the utility from attending a match with the utility from the outside option. The model also recognizes that consumer preferences are heterogeneous. And the estimated utility coefficients can be used to recover consumers' wiliness to pay for specific attributes.

2.1. Consumer utility maximization

Suppose individual i chooses between attending a professional football match and not attending. Let $j \in \{0, 1\}$, where $j = 1$ denotes attendance and $j = 0$ denotes nonattendance. The utility that individual i obtains from alternative j is:

$$U_{ij} = V_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \tag{1}$$

Where V_{ij} denotes the observable component of utility and ϵ_{ij} denotes unobserved preference and measurement error.

For the attendance alternative, the observable component of utility is specified as:

$$V_{i1} = \beta_Q Q_i + \beta_M M_i + \beta_C C_i + \beta_s S_i + \beta_A A_i - \alpha P_i + \gamma' Z_i \tag{2}$$

Where Q_i represents the perceived sporting quality and attractiveness of the match; M_i represents the club image and reputation; C_i represents cultural identification and club attachment; S_i, represents stadium quality and matchday services; A_i represents accessibility and convenience; P_i represents the ticket price; Z_i represents individual consumer characteristics.

The coefficient $\alpha > 0$ measure the marginal disutility associated with ticket price, and

$$\frac{\partial U_{i1}}{\partial P_i} < 0 \tag{3}$$

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Economically, football attendance is therefore interpreted as a utility maximizing consumption decision. Consumers compare the expected sporting, emotional, social and experiential benefits of attendance with the monetary and opportunity costs involve.

2.2. Attendance decision

Let the net utility from attending rath than not attending be:

$$\mathrm{U_i^*} = \mathrm{U_{i1}} - \mathrm{U_{i0}} \tag{4}$$

Normalizing the utility from non-attendance to 0, the attendance utility can be written as :

$$U_i^* = \beta_Q Q_i + \beta_M M_i + \beta_C C_i + \beta_S S_i + \beta_A A_i - \alpha P_i + \gamma' Z_i + \varepsilon_i \tag{5}$$

The observed attendance decision is:

$$\mathrm{Attend_i} = \begin{cases} 1, \ if \ \mathrm{U_i^*} > 0 \\ 0, if \ \mathrm{U_i^*} \leq 0 \end{cases} \tag{6}$$

Thus, individual i attends a professional football match when the utility obtained from attendance exceeds the utility associated with the outside option.

The total cost of attendance extends beyond the ticket price. It includes transportation cost, time cost and opportunity cost. The total attendance cost is:

$$\mathrm{TC_i} = \mathrm{P_i} + \mathrm{TravelCost_i} + \mathrm{TimeCost_i} + \mathrm{OpportunityCost_i} \tag{7}$$

The attendance decision can be expressed as:

$$\mathrm{Attend_i} = 1 \text{ if } \mathrm{Benefit_i} > \mathrm{TC_i} \tag{8}$$

This formulation highlights an important feature of football demand. A relatively inexpensive ticket may still generate low attendance if the stadium is hard to reach, the kickoff schedule is inconvenient, or the overall matchday experience is poor. Conversely, consumers may accept a higher ticket price when the match delivers high sporting quality, strong emotional appeal, premium stadium services, and convenient access, as the perceived total benefits outweigh the increased monetary cost.

Assuming the random component ϵ_i follows a logistic distribution, the probability that individual i attends the match can be represented by a binary logit model:

$$\mathrm{P\left(Attend_i = 1\right)} = \frac{\exp(\mathrm{V_i})}{1+\exp(\mathrm{V_i})} \tag{9}$$

2.3. Consumer preference heterogeneity

Individuals vary in income, football involvement, club attachment, and leisure preferences. Consequently, the same ticket price or match characteristic may generate different levels of utility across consumers.

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Consumers with stronger emotional attachment to a club or host city may drive greater non-monetary utility from attending matches. This relationship can be represented by including an interaction term:

$$U_i^* = \beta_Q Q_i + \beta_M M_i + \beta_C C_i + \beta_s S_i + \beta_A A_i - \alpha P_i + \gamma' Z_i + \delta(P_i * C_i) + \epsilon_i \tag{10}$$

The marginal effect of ticket price is therefore:

$$\frac{\partial U_i^*}{\partial P_i} = -\alpha + \delta C_i \tag{11}$$

If $\delta > 0$, stronger cultural identification weakens the negative effect of ticket prices on attendance utility. Highly attached supporters may therefore continue attending even when ticket price increase.

2.4. Willingness to pay

The marginal willingness to pay for attribute X is obtained by comparing the utility coefficient of the attribute with the marginal disutility of ticket price:

$$\mathrm{WTP}_X = \frac{\beta_X}{\alpha} \tag{12}$$

This measures the increase in ticket price that would leave the consumer indifferent after a one-unit improvement in attribute X.

The willingness to pay for a derby match is:

$$\mathrm{WTP}_{\mathrm{Derby}} = \frac{\beta_{\mathrm{Derby}}}{\alpha} \tag{13}$$

While the WTP for a football stadium is:

$$\mathrm{WTP}_{\text{Football Stadium}} = \frac{\beta_{\text{Football Stadium}}}{\alpha} \tag{14}$$

Similarly, the WTP for improved matchday service can be expressed as:

$$\mathrm{WTP}_{\text{Service Quality}} = \frac{\beta_{\text{Service Quality}}}{\alpha} \tag{15}$$

Overall, the framework provides an economic foundation for examining how match quality, club image, cultural attachment, stadium services, accessibility, ticket price, and individual characteristics jointly shape attendance intentions and willingness to pay for the Chinese professional football market.

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey design and sample

This study uses a structured survey to investigate consumers' preferences, attendance decisions, and willingness to pay (WTP) for Chinese professional football which was distributed through the Wenjuanxing platform. The questionnaire covered demographics, football interest, previous match

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attendance, club attachment, ticket-price and stadium attitudes, preferred match attributes, matchday services, accessibility, attendance barriers, several WTP measures, four hypothetical attendance scenarios, and next-season ticket purchase likelihood. The survey contained 216 valid respondents for the initial questions. Because the questionnaire used branching logic, 174 respondents answered the principal ticketing and consumer-preference module used in most inferential analyses. Income-based models contain 157 observations because "prefer not to say" responses were treated as missing.

3.2. Variable construction

Football interest and next season purchase likelihood were represented on increasing five-point scales. Binary indicators capture previous attendance, following a favorite club, and purchase intentions. Willingness to Pay (WTP) was measured in intervals, therefore, category midpoints were used as an approximate value.

3.3. Statistical methods

Four correlation tests are conducted to examine football interest versus purchase likelihood, emotional club attachment versus purchase likelihood, regular-ticket WTP and derby premium WTP, and ticket-price importance and regular-ticket WTP. T-tests are used to compared prior attendees with never- attendees, club followers with respondents with no favorite club, higher-income respondents with lower-income respondents and students, and price sensitive respondents with less price sensitive respondents. ANOVAs tests are conducted to evaluate heterogeneity in regular-ticket WTP across income groups, purchase likelihood across club attachment levels and the level of interest in football, and in value-added package WTP across different income groups.

4. Results

4.1. Correlation analysis

Table 1. Spearman correlation results

Relationship	N	ρ	p-value
Football interest – purchase likelihood	174	0.383	<0.001
Emotional club attachment – purchase likelihood	174	0.206	0.0065
Regular-ticket WTP – derby premium WTP	174	0.394	<0.001
Ticket-price importance – regular-ticket WTP	174	−0.171	0.0241

Note. WTP = willingness to pay.

Table 1 displays the Spearman correlation results. Football interest is positively associated with next-season purchase likelihood ($\rho = 0.383$, $p < .001$). This represents a moderate relationship and suggests that respondents with stronger general interest in football were more likely to express an intention to purchase a professional football ticket in the following season. Emotional club attachment is also positively associated with purchase likelihood ($\rho = 0.206$, $p = .0065$). Together,

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these findings indicate that both general engagement with football and emotional connection to clubs are related to ticket demand.

Regular ticket WTP is positively associated with the additional premium respondents were willing to pay for a derby or rivalry match ($\rho = 0.394$, $p < 0.001$). Consumers who were willing to pay more for an ordinary league match therefore also tended to accept larger premiums for higher-value rivalry matches, identifying a portion of high-value consumers with consistently high WTP.

In contrast, ticket-price importance is negatively associated with regular-ticket WTP ($\rho = -0.171$, $p = 0.0241$). Although the magnitude of the relationship was relatively small, its direction is consistent with greater price sensitivity: respondents who placed greater importance on ticket prices tended to report lower acceptable ticket prices.

Overall, the correlation analysis identifies two related dimensions of consumer demand. Football interest and club attachment are associated primarily with purchasing propensity, whereas baseline valuation and price sensitivity help differentiate consumers according to how much they would be willing to spend.

4.2. Welch t-tests

Table 2. Welch t-tests of consumer-group differences

Comparison / outcome	Group 1 n, mean	Group 0 n, mean	t	p-value
Prior attendees vs never: purchase likelihood	71, 3.41	103, 2.78	3.17	0.0019
Club followers vs no favorite club: purchase likelihood	93, 3.39	81, 2.63	3.98	<0.001
Higher vs lower income/student: regular WTP	47, 159.57	110, 120.91	2.24	0.0282
Price barrier vs others: stadium premium WTP	111, 13.45	63, 25.43	−2.83	0.0059

Note. Purchase likelihood is measured on a 1–5 scale. Regular WTP is RMB; stadium premium WTP is an approximate percentage

Table 2 shows the Welch t-tests of consumer group differences. Respondents who had previously attended a professional football match reported significantly higher purchase likelihood than those who had never attended (3.41 vs 2.78; t=3.17, p=0.0019), a difference of approximately 0.63 points on the five-point scale. Similarly, respondents who follow a favorite club showed significantly higher purchase likelihood than those who have no preferred club (3.39 vs 2.63; $t = 3.98$, $p < 0.001$).

The WTP comparisons reveal a different source of consumer heterogeneity. Higher-income respondents reported an average regular ticket WTP of RMB 159.57, compared with RMB 120.91 among lower income respondents and students (t=2.24, p=.028). The result indicates that economic capacity is associated with their valuation of the live match product.

Price sensitivity also influenced consumers' valuation of premium experiences. Respondents who identified high ticket prices as an attendance barrier were willing to pay an average stadium premium of only 13.45, compared with 25.43 among respondents who did not identify price as a barrier (t=-2.83, p=0.0059). Thus, the less price sensitive group is willing to pay almost twice the premium for an improved stadium experience.

Taking together, the t-test results differentiate consumers by two dimensions: past involvement and club loyalty drive gaps in purchase intention, while income and price sensitivity create gaps in

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monetary WTP.

4.3. ANOVA

Table 3. One-way ANOVA results

Outcome / grouping	Groups	F	p-value	Selected means
Regular-ticket WTP by income	5	3.26	0.0134	3k–6k: 86.72; 10k–30k: 157.50; >30k: 171.43
Purchase likelihood by club attachment	4	7.29	<0.001	None: 2.63; weak: 3.21; somewhat: 3.19; very strong: 3.92
Purchase likelihood by football interest	4	10.24	<0.001	Not very: 2.43; neutral: 2.65; somewhat: 3.28; very: 3.80
Package WTP by income	5	7.04	<0.001	3k–6k: 19.17; 10k–30k: 44.06; >30k: 61.00

Note. F tests are omnibus tests; displayed means describe patterns rather than pairwise significance.

Table 3 displays the ANOVA results, which provide further evidence of heterogeneity in regular-ticket WTP across income groups. Mean WTP was RMB 86.72 among respondents earning RMB 3K-6K, compared with RMB 157.5 among those earning RMB 10K-30K and RMB 171.43 among those earning more than RMB 30k, with F=3.26, p=0.013. The observed pattern indicates greater price acceptance among higher income consumers.

Purchase likelihood also differed substantially according to consumers' level of engagement with football. Differences across club-attachment groups were statistically significant ($F = 7.29$, $p < 0.001$). Respondents with no club attachment reported a mean purchase likelihood of 2.63; this value rose monotonically with attachment strength, reaching 3.21 for respondents with weak club attachment and 3.92 for those with very strong club attachment. Similarly, purchase likelihood differed significantly across levels of football interest ($F = 10.24$, $p < 0.001$), with mean purchase likelihood increasing from 2.43 for respondents who were "not very interested" in football to 3.80 for respondents who were "very interested." This pattern reinforces the findings from the correlation analysis and demonstrates that general football engagement is strongly associated with future ticket demand.

Finally, value-added package WTP differs significantly across income groups ($F = 7.04$, $p < 0.001$). The highest income groups observed an average package WTP that is more than three times that of the lowest income groups. This finding suggests that income differences extend beyond the basic ticket to willingness to purchase additional benefits.

Overall, this income-related segmentation in WTP supports differentiated ticket pricing and value-added product strategies for diverse consumer segments.

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4.4. Regression analysis

Table 4. Logistic regression: next-season ticket purchase

Predictor	B	SE	z	p	OR
Intercept	−4.171	0.754	−5.53	<0.001	0.015
Football interest	0.815	0.186	4.38	<0.001	2.260
Strong home team selected	0.994	0.355	2.80	0.005	2.703

Note. N = 174; McFadden pseudo-R^2 = 0.147; likelihood-ratio p < .001.

Table 4 reports the logistic regression results for next season's ticket purchase. Football interest is positively and statistically significantly associated with ticket purchase, with a coefficient of 0.815 and an odds ratio of 2.260 ($p<0.001$). Holding the other variables constant, a one unit increase in football interest is associated with 2.26 times the odds of purchasing a ticket next season. The selection of a strong home team is also positively associated with ticket purchasing, with a coefficient of 0.994 and an odds ratio of 2.703 ($p = 0.005$). Holding all other variables constant, respondents who value a strong home team have 2.703 times the odds of purchasing tickets than other respondents. These findings suggest that ticket demand is driven by consumer engagement with football and the sporting attractiveness of the home team.

Table 5. OLS regression: derby/rivalry premium WTP

Predictor	B	Robust SE	z	p	95% CI
Intercept	4.184	2.996	1.40	0.162	[−1.687, 10.056]
Regular-ticket WTP	0.0625	0.0214	2.92	0.0035	[0.020, 0.104]
Income midpoint	0.000670	0.000199	3.36	0.0008	[0.000, 0.001]

Note. N = 157; HC3 robust SE; R^2 = 0.189; adjusted R^2 = 0.178; model p < .001.

Table 5 examines the additional willingness to pay for derby or rivalry match premiums. Regular ticket WTP is positively associated with derby premium WTP, with a coefficient of 0.0625 ($p = 0.0035$). This indicates that consumers with a higher baseline valuation of professional football also tend to accept larger price premiums for more attractive matches. Income is positively associated with derby premium WTP, with a coefficient of 0.000670 ($p = 0.0008$), suggesting that greater purchasing power increases consumers' willingness to pay for the price premium of high-profile rivalry matches. Overall, these results indicate that WTP for derby matches reflects both consumers' valuation of live football experience and their economic capacity.

Table 6. OLS regression: value-added package WTP

Predictor	B	Robust SE	z	p	95% CI
Intercept	14.004	3.203	4.37	<0.001	[7.727, 20.281]
Income midpoint	0.001140	0.000277	4.12	<0.001	[0.001, 0.002]
Distance barrier	11.108	4.369	2.54	0.011	[2.544, 19.672]

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Note. N = 157; HC3 robust SE; $R^2 = 0.177$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.166$; model $p < .001$.

Table 6 reports the determinants of WTP for value added matchday packages. Income has a positive and statistically significant association with value-added package WTP, with a coefficient of 0.001140 ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that greater purchasing power increases consumers' willingness to pay for enhanced matchday services and experiences. Respondents who identified distance as an attendance barrier were willing to pay 11.1 units (p=0.011) more for value added packages than other respondents. One possible interpretation is that consumers facing greater travel costs require a more attractive experience to justify attending in person. Premium services, improved hospitality or other benefits may help compensate for the inconveniences associated with travel.

Table 7. Logistic regression: high-quality derby scenario attendance

Predictor	B	SE	z	p	OR
Intercept	0.357	0.218	1.63	0.102	1.429
Derby/rivalry selected	0.949	0.343	2.77	0.0057	2.583
Online/TV preference	−1.045	0.427	−2.45	0.0144	0.352

Note. N = 174; McFadden pseudo-$R^2 = 0.065$; likelihood-ratio $p < .001$.

Table 7 shows the attendance intention under a hypothetical high-quality derby scenario. Respondents who identified derby matches as attractive have significantly higher odds of attending the scenario, with an odds ratio of 2.583 (p=0.0057). These results suggest that match-specific characteristics can increase live attendance demand. In contrast, people who preferred online or television viewing had lower odds of attending in person, with an odds ratio of 0.352 (p=0.0144), meaning their odds of attending the scenario were approximately 65% lower than other respondents without such preference. In all, attractive match features can increase physical attendance, but the convenience of digital viewing remains a strong substitute for in person attendance.

5. Management implication

The empirical findings provide several practical suggestions for professional football clubs in China.

First, clubs should prioritize long-term fan engagement instead of short-term promotions. The data show that people who are more interested in football and attached to home teams are more likely to buy tickets and accept higher prices. Instead of only using temporary discounts to sell more tickets quickly, clubs should run regular social media content, host community fan events, hold player meetups, and support youth football programs. These efforts can build long-term loyalty, which brings more stable and lasting revenue than short-term promotions.

Second, clubs should use differentiated pricing instead of a single fixed price. People have very different willingness to pay for tickets, especially across different income levels. A uniform ticket price would either exclude low-income fans or leave a profit margin for high-income fans. Clubs can set different prices for different seat areas, charge reasonable premiums for derby and key matches, and use flexible pricing such as discounts for earlier decisions before popular games or last minute deals for unsold seats. This can help maximize total ticket revenue.

Third, premium matchday products can be a good extra source of income. The results show that high-income fans are willing to pay more for value-added packages, and fans who travel far also pay extra for better experiences to make up for the trouble of traveling. For big matches, clubs can offer different tiers of ticket bundles that include extras like food coupon, related product discounts, or

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access to fan activities before matches. These products earn more revenue from high-spending fans and make long-distance trips more worthy for those who are still hesitating.

Finally, clubs should deal with the rise of online match viewing in a smart way. Even for exciting derby matches, people who prefer watching on TV or online are much less likely to attend in person. Instead of trying to force all the fans to come to the stadium, clubs can work with broadcasters on paid streaming and online fan memberships to earn money from home viewers. Also, they can offer unique experiences like pitch-side access or player meet-and-greets to show the value of attending offline matches. Thus, attracting some online fans to the stadium.

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the determinants of match attendance and willingness to pay for Chinese professional football, using survey data from Chinese consumers. The analysis combines correlation tests, t-tests, ANOVA, logistic regression and OLS regression to examine how consumer traits, match attributes and situational factors shape viewing decisions.

Several patterns emerge from the results. First, consumer engagement is strongly related to future ticket demand. Higher football interest and stronger emotional attachment to a home team consistently increase both ticket purchase intention and willingness to accept price premiums. Logistic regression further demonstrates that respondents with greater football interest have significantly higher probability of buying tickets in the next season, and they are also more likely to attend high-quality derby matches.

Second, clear heterogeneity exists in consumers' willingness to pay. Income level is a core driver of these differences: higher-income consumers accept higher regular ticket prices, and show greater WTP for both derby match premiums and value-added matchday packages. Besides, consumers with a higher baseline ticket valuation are also willing to pay larger premiums for important matches. These results indicate that the Chinese football audience should be treated as a heterogeneous consumer market, rather than a single uniform group.

Third, the findings show the importance of the overall matchday product, not only ticket price, but match quality, stadium type, travel accessibility and on-site services all shape people's attendance decisions. At the same time, online and television viewing act as a strong substitute for in-person attendance: even for attractive derby matches, consumers who prefer digital viewing are still much less likely to go to the stadium to watch the game.

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is based on an online survey, so it may not perfectly represent the entire Chinese football audience, and may over-represent younger, more internet-active fans. In addition, all WTP and attendance intention measures are based on stated preferences from hypothetical scenarios, rather than observed real purchasing behavior, which may be deviated from actual consumer choices.

Larger and more geographically diverse survey samples would help strengthen the validity of these findings in future work. Researches could also combine survey data with real club-level ticket transaction records and match characteristic data to verify predicted preferences against actual consumption behavior. In addition, future studies could also compare consumer preferences across different leagues, cities and club tiers in order to draw more general conclusions.

Despite these limitations, this study provides practical evidence that the future commercial development of Chinese professional football depends on both on-pitch quality and consumer-focused operations. As Chinese professional football continues its transition toward more financially sustainable and market-oriented development, a deeper understanding of consumer preferences can

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effectively help clubs optimize pricing strategies, expand revenue sources, and support the long-term development of the industry.

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