

Article

What Do We Focus on? Investigating Chinese Public Preferences for CSR Initiatives in Professional Sports Clubs

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines the Chinese public's preferences for corporate social responsibility (CSR) measures implemented by professional sports clubs, with a focus on identifying priority dimensions and heterogeneity across demographic groups. **Approach:** A choice-based conjoint analysis was conducted with 1043 residents across 22 Chinese cities hosting professional basketball or football clubs. Participants evaluated hypothetical CSR scenarios comprising six dimensions and 20 attribute levels. Cluster analysis was employed to analyze preference heterogeneity. **Findings:** Labor rights protection emerged as the most influential CSR dimension, accounting for 28.64% of the total importance. Subsequent dimensions, including Product/Service Quality (19.51%), Fair Sportsmanship (17.01%), Sports Development (14.07%), Economic Impact (12.73%), and Community Engagement (8.05%), also exerted substantial influence. Cluster analysis revealed five distinct preference segments: Labor Rights Prioritizers (24.5%), Performance-Driven Advocates (20.6%), Ethics-Focused Supporters (24.8%), Community-Embedded Participants (16.0%), and Economy-Boost Enthusiasts (15.1%). Notably, negative CSR practices (e.g., wage delays, match-fixing) significantly diminished public support, while proactive measures (e.g., employee development, community programs) enhanced preferences. **Innovation:** This study makes three incremental contributions compared with existing literature. First, it integrates both positive and negative CSR practices into a unified framework, whereas most prior studies examine only positive practices. Second, it expands CSR research beyond fan groups to include the broader public, thus enriching stakeholder theory applications in sports. Third, it adds empirical insights from developing countries to the academic community, thereby contextualizing CSR preferences within China's unique institutional and cultural environment.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility; Professional Sports Clubs; public preferences; conjoint analysis; China; stakeholder expectations



Academic Editor: Flavio Boccia

Received: 16 August 2025

Revised: 13 September 2025

Accepted: 19 September 2025

Published: 30 October 2025

Citation: Wang, C.; Song, J.; Wang, Z. What Do We Focus on? Investigating Chinese Public Preferences for CSR Initiatives in Professional Sports Clubs. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 9648. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17219648>

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1. Introduction

The significant value of corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been widely demonstrated in academia, with its role being to minimize the harmful impacts of business operations while maximizing long-term beneficial value for society [1]. In fact, many corporate managers have deeply recognized the strategic value of CSR for their business operations, and global CSR expenditures have shown a sustained growth trend. In modern society, actively assuming CSR is no longer merely a cost of doing business or a moral constraint; it has become an effective and proactive strategy that companies can employ to build brand image and gain competitive advantage [2].

Similarly, many sports organizations now regard contributing to society as a form of strategic investment that benefits not only the organization itself but also stakeholders and the broader public [3]. Compared with traditional businesses and other sports organizations, professional sports clubs operate in a highly commercial and media-intensive environment, which makes the strategic value of CSR initiatives aimed at gaining public support even more pronounced [4].

To date, a substantial body of research has shown that CSR is an important source of competitive advantage for professional sports clubs, helping them gain public trust [5], positive word-of-mouth [6], sponsorships and fan loyalty [7]. The public increasingly expects professional sports clubs to carefully consider the social impact of their operations and actively address a wide range of societal issues—such as improving labor rights protection [8], promoting youth health education [9], participating in community development [10], and tackling environmental challenges [11]. Given the public's sustained interest in CSR practices by professional sports clubs, exploring public attitudes toward these initiatives has become a worthwhile research direction.

In practice, companies do not allocate resources to CSR activities equally. Instead, they strategically channel attention and funds into selected areas [12], as CSR efforts reflect ethical motivations and signal organizational priorities and social concerns [13]. When a company emphasizes a specific type of CSR initiative, it may influence how consumers respond to the company and its mission [14]. Accordingly, the public reacts differently to different CSR practices. In such cases, it becomes essential to understand the theoretical mechanisms behind these differentiated responses.

This issue is important because, on a theoretical level, the public may react in vastly different ways to different CSR domains. These differences reflect the diverse and dynamic nature of public preferences. Unpacking the underlying mechanisms can help build a more generalizable “CSR–public response” theoretical model and shed light on the complex relationship between public attitudes and corporate CSR practices [15]. From a practical standpoint, the formulation of CSR strategies requires balancing organizational goals with societal expectations. Without a deep understanding of core public concerns, companies may face a dilemma: they may be unable to use CSR to enhance competitiveness or effectively respond to stakeholder demands [16]. Especially under conditions of limited budgets and resources, professional sports clubs must conduct CSR activities in areas favored by the public to prevent the dual loss of social trust and economic benefits due to strategic misalignment, which is highly practical for improving marketing efficiency and operational environments [17]. Unfortunately, to date, little research has investigated public preferences for different types of CSR activities in professional sports clubs.

The CSR practices of Chinese professional sports clubs provide a suitable research context [18,19]. First, compared with the mature professional sports industries of developed countries such as the UK and the U.S., China's professional sports industry has a relatively short history of just over 30 years, is undergoing rapid commercialization and faces unique challenges [20]. The sector holds great market potential and is currently in a stage of rapid growth, offering valuable academic insights from a developing country context, particularly regarding how CSR operates within this distinct institutional and cultural environment. Second, in recent years, Chinese professional sports clubs have implemented a wide variety of CSR initiatives with uneven outcomes—some even spark public controversy (e.g., widespread labor disputes and match-fixing scandals), thus providing a rich analytical framework for understanding public reactions to CSR in a market experiencing growing pains [21]. In line with this, Chiu W et al. [22] identified three noteworthy research directions for CSR in sports management: 1. understanding local communities' attitudes toward CSR

initiatives by sports organizations; 2. exploring public perceptions in developing country contexts; and 3. examining more types and levels (positive or negative) of CSR activities.

Thus, this study aims to examine the preferences of 1043 local residents from 22 Chinese cities with professional basketball or football clubs regarding the CSR activities of these clubs. We employ conjoint analysis to identify the CSR dimensions and initiatives most favored by the public and visualize the results. Conjoint analysis is a powerful method for uncovering otherwise elusive consumer preferences [23] because consumers make choices among a series of options to determine their values and relative importance levels. Additionally, we use cluster analysis to identify groups of the public with different preferences more precisely.

In summary, although CSR has received increasing scholarly attention, existing studies rarely provide systematic evidence on how the public evaluates different CSR dimensions in the context of professional sports clubs, particularly in developing countries such as China. Prior research has suggested that preferences for CSR vary across domains and contexts [24–26]. Building on this, our study aims to address two main gaps: first, the lack of systematic examination of preference rankings across multiple CSR domains; second, the insufficient exploration of heterogeneous public preferences across demographic groups.

Based on this, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1. *Among CSR dimensions, the Chinese public will place stronger emphasis on labor rights, product/service quality, and fair play promotion, while community engagement and economic contribution will be relatively less valued.*

H2. *Public preferences for CSR initiatives will be heterogeneous, varying significantly across demographic characteristics.*

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature and introduces the analytical framework. Section 3 presents the methodology and data collection. Section 4 reports the empirical results. Section 5 discusses the findings, draws cross-national implications, and concludes with practical insights and future research directions.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Theoretical Foundations of CSR Preferences

CSR is a multifaceted and evolving concept that encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities of organizations toward stakeholders and society [27]. In the context of professional sports clubs, CSR practices have increasingly gained attention because of clubs' high visibility and deep-rooted community ties [4]. CSR research has traditionally focused on firms' motivations and performance outcomes; however, more recent scholarship has emphasized stakeholder responses, especially consumer and public perceptions [28].

To understand public preferences regarding CSR, a theoretical lens that captures the interaction between CSR initiatives and individual-level attitudes and behaviors is needed. Stakeholder theory [29] posits that organizations must balance the interests of various stakeholders, including the general public, whose expectations shape CSR priorities. Similarly, legitimacy theory suggests that organizations undertake CSR activities to align with societal norms and values, thereby securing public support [30].

Conjoint analysis, as a method rooted in consumer behavior theory, assumes that individuals make trade-offs when evaluating multi-attribute options. This is particularly relevant for CSR, in which initiatives vary across domains (e.g., environment, labor, ethics),

and stakeholders assign different weights to each domain. In this sense, conjoint analysis offers a robust framework to uncover latent preference structures, enabling a deeper understanding of how CSR configurations influence public attitudes.

Moreover, preference heterogeneity is theoretically anchored in the concept of value-based segmentation. According to social identity theory [31], individuals evaluate CSR initiatives through the lens of their personal, cultural, and social identities. Thus, demographic and psychographic differences among the public can lead to divergent CSR preferences. This aligns with emerging research that applies clustering techniques to segment stakeholder responses on the basis of value orientations, political ideology, and cultural norms [32,33].

2.2. Research Progress on Public Preferences for CSR

While CSR research in sports has expanded over the past two decades, most studies have focused on consumer attitudes, particularly fans' behavioral intentions [34,35]. However, the general public, which encompasses non-fans and local residents, also constitutes a critical stakeholder group. These perceptions often shape the broader social legitimacy of sports organizations. Importantly, legitimacy is not only influenced by clubs' internal CSR activities but also by external factors such as fan mobility, demand patterns, and media exposure. For instance, Hernández et al. [36] show that the displacement of fans across regions affects the stability of club support and highlights the importance of CSR initiatives that strengthen community ties. Similarly, research on spectator demand indicates that on-field fairness and competitive balance are closely linked to public interest [37], while the demand for televised football further underscores how CSR strategies that ensure transparency, accessibility, and engagement may enhance legitimacy [38]. These findings suggest that CSR in professional sports cannot be fully understood without considering the broader environment in which fans interact with clubs, thereby reinforcing the need to investigate public preferences beyond traditional consumer groups.

Previous studies on public CSR preferences have indicated that individuals exhibit domain-specific sensitivities. For example, Lerro et al. [24] reported that Italian consumers prefer environmental and ethical CSR practices over economic contributions in the food industry. Panthong and Taecharungroj [39] employed conjoint analysis in Thailand and revealed that local residents prioritized community and educational initiatives over environmentally oriented CSR. In China, Liu et al. [26] reported that fans' perceptions of CSR in professional football are correlated with patronage intentions, although general public attitudes have not been extensively explored.

Furthermore, prior research has often employed traditional survey methods, which are limited by social desirability bias and cannot reveal trade-offs among multiple CSR attributes [39]. This study addresses such gaps by applying choice-based conjoint analysis, which enhances ecological validity and uncovers the relative importance of various CSR activities.

Additionally, few studies have systematically incorporated both positive and negative CSR actions within the same evaluative framework. However, as recent scandals in Chinese professional sports have shown (e.g., match-fixing, labor disputes), negative CSR behaviors can profoundly impact public trust. Including such behaviors allows for a more comprehensive assessment of public preference structures and offers actionable insights for CSR strategy development.

2.3. Analytical Framework

Integrating the above perspectives, this study constructs an analytical framework that includes both the structural (attribute-level) and individual (value-based) determinants

of CSR preferences. The use of conjoint analysis enables the decomposition of CSR into six key attributes: labor rights protection, product/service quality, community engagement, fair play promotion, sport development, and economic contribution. Public responses to these attributes are interpreted through the lenses of stakeholder expectations and legitimacy considerations.

To account for heterogeneity in public preferences, cluster analysis is further employed. This dual-method approach not only identifies aggregate preference trends but also reveals distinct public segments, each with unique value orientations and CSR priorities. By doing so, the study provides theoretical contributions to CSR preference modeling and practical guidance for sports organizations aiming to design resonant CSR strategies.

In summary, this section establishes the theoretical rationale and empirical relevance of exploring public preferences for CSR initiatives in professional sports, thereby setting the foundation for the subsequent methodological and analytical components of the research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Levels of Different Attributes of Corporate Social Responsibility in Professional Sports Clubs

On the basis of the six main attributes of CSR identified for Chinese professional sports clubs in the preceding section, we generate specific implementation levels for each attribute according to recent prominent topics related to CSR in Chinese professional sports clubs, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Attributes and Attribute Levels of the CSR of Chinese Professional Sports Clubs.

CSR Attributes	CSR Attribute Levels
Labor Rights Protection	Level 1: The club has delayed salaries and used dual contracts; Level 2: The club operates stably, meeting basic labor and contractual obligations; Level 3: The club maintains strong labor relations and provides employee development opportunities.
Product/Service Quality Enhancement	Level 1: The club has exhibited contractual violations with partners and consumer rights infringement cases; Level 2: The club demonstrates strict contractual compliance with partners and consistent consumer rights protection; Level 3: The club cultivates sustainable relationships with sponsors and consumers through year-round engagement initiatives.
Community Engagement	Level 1: The club provides subsidized, high-quality fitness training services to the community; Level 2: The club demonstrates sustained commitment to vulnerable groups through poverty relief and disability support programs; Level 3: The club institutionalizes environmental initiatives including low-carbon lifestyle promotion and waste management campaigns Level 4: The club facilitates local sports culture development through complimentary game ticket distribution.
Fair Play Promotion	Level 1: The club has been penalized by state authorities for match-fixing and bribery violations; Level 2: The club received league sanctions for operational misconduct including match violations and financial misreporting; Level 3: The club maintains full compliance with league regulations without recent violations; Level 4: The club has consistently earned the league's Sportsmanship Award for exemplary management practices.
Sport Development	Level 1: The club demonstrates suboptimal competitive performance with no youth training system and zero national team selections; Level 2: The club maintains average performance with a partial youth training system and occasional national team call-ups; Level 3: The club achieves top-tier performance through its well-developed youth training system, and has consistently multiple players for national team.
Economic development contribution	Level 1: The club operates with constrained finances, demonstrating minimal impact on local employment and supply chain development; Level 2: The club maintains financial stability while generating moderate employment, although with limited collaboration with local industries; Level 3: The club is in good financial condition, generates considerable employment opportunities, and collaborates with local businesses to boost the development of sectors such as catering and tourism.

For the attribute of labor rights protection, in light of persistent issues in Chinese professional sports clubs, such as delayed payment of salaries and the use of dual contracts [40], this attribute is operationalized into three levels: (1) “The club has occasionally been reported for delayed salary payments or signing dual contracts with employees in recent years”; (2) “The club operates stably, ensuring basic labor rights, such as contracts and social security for employees”; and (3) “Employees actively participate in the

club's governance, enjoy harmonious labor relations, with the club providing strong career development opportunities".

For the attribute of service/product quality enhancement, prior studies have often evaluated both investor and consumer interests by drawing from stakeholder theory. Considering frequent contractual breaches and consumer complaints in China [41], this attribute is defined as follows: (1) "The club has violated partner agreements (e.g., last-minute sponsor logo removals) and faced consumer complaints"; (2) "The club honors contracts with investors/sponsors and safeguards consumer rights, with no major scandals"; and (3) "The club maintains strong sponsor and fan relations, organizing open days, cultural products, and amateur events, fostering a vibrant local sports culture".

For the dimension of community engagement, this study identifies four typical types of community-based CSR activities as attribute levels [17,42]: (1) "The club is dedicated to promoting public fitness. You and your family can regularly participate in high-quality community services such as scientific fitness guidance, youth training programs, and the use of sports venues and other high-quality community sports services at a low price all year round"; (2) "The club actively engages in charitable work, maintains close relations with multiple nonprofit organizations, and participates in poverty alleviation, assistance for persons with disabilities, and care for the elderly"; (3) "The club is concerned with environmental protection and regularly participates in environmental public service initiatives such as waste sorting, wildlife conservation, and low-carbon lifestyle promotion"; (4) "The club aims to meet the community's sports viewing needs and occasionally distributes match tickets of its professional team to your neighborhood or workplace".

For the attribute of fair play promotion, in light of the credibility crisis triggered by misconduct such as match-fixing, gambling, and financial irregularities [43,44], this attribute includes four levels: (1) "The club was penalized for illegal conduct such as match-fixing, bribery, or betting"; (2) "The club faced fines for incidents such as on-field violence, property damage, or financial and transfer-related irregularities"; (3) "The club adheres to rules on fair play and lawful operation and has not been involved in violations in recent years"; and (4) "The club has demonstrated outstanding compliance in these areas and has won the league's Fair Play Award for three consecutive years".

For the dimension of sport development, this study adopts three levels that correspond to current conditions in Chinese professional clubs: (1) "The club lacks a youth training system, performs at lower-to-mid level in the league, and has no history of sending players who represent the national team in international competitions"; (2) "The club has not built a complete youth training system but performs at an upper-mid level in the league, with one or two players having competed internationally for the national team"; (3) "The club runs a robust youth training system, contends for championships, and produces multiple national team players" [45].

For the attribute of economic development contribution, this study identifies three levels: (1) "The club has experienced financial difficulties in recent years and made limited contributions to local employment and the broader industry chain"; (2) "The club has maintained a balanced financial status and provided a certain number of job opportunities"; and (3) "The club enjoys healthy financial conditions, creates significant employment opportunities, and contributes to local industrial development".

As shown in Table 1, the conjoint experiment includes six core attributes of CSR performance by professional sports clubs, identified on the basis of prior research and contextual relevance to Chinese sports: labor rights protection, product/service quality enhancement, community engagement, fair play promotion, sport development, and economic development contribution. We assigned a total of 20 levels across these six attributes, carefully constructing each level to reflect plausible, observable CSR behaviors in Chinese

professional sports clubs. Notably, we included both positive and negative manifestations of each attribute, a rarely adopted yet valuable approach that enhances ecological validity and distinguishes our study from prior CSR choice experiments that focus only on positive features. The specific levels across CSR attributes for Chinese professional sports clubs constitute the core experimental stimuli in the subsequent conjoint analysis.

3.2. Joint Experimental Design and Procedure

Conjoint analysis is a method that is based on scenario experiments and multivariate analysis techniques and is commonly used to measure the public's trade-offs among multi-attribute choices [46]. By requiring respondents to make decisions and trade-offs among competing attribute combinations, conjoint analysis enables a more effective examination of individuals' true preferences in complex decision-making scenarios [47].

As shown in Table 1, combining all 6 attributes and 20 corresponding attribute levels yields a total of 1296 possible profiles. However, it is clearly impractical to include all the combinations in the experiment. Thus, following standard practices in conjoint analysis, this study adopts a fractional factorial design, systematically selecting representative combinations from all possible profiles while ensuring orthogonality and balance in the experiment [47]. To optimize design efficiency, we further refined this approach to enhance orthogonality and statistical robustness. The final design consists of 120 CSR profiles with a D efficiency of 85.75%, ensuring a robust yet concise experimental setup. The study employs a paired design to present specific profiles [48], requiring respondents to choose the more satisfactory option between two alternatives. To prevent respondent fatigue from completing too many choice tasks, the number of selection tasks was limited to 7 [49]. In each task, participants were asked to answer the following question: "Which of the two clubs would you prefer to support, on the basis of their CSR practices?" This format approximates binary decision-making scenarios typical in real-world evaluations.

Data were collected using a widely used online survey platform in China. Figure 1 shows an example of a "task" in the conjoint survey produced. Standard validity checks (e.g., attention filters, response time thresholds) were applied to ensure data quality. Standard statistical tools were applied for experimental design and clustering analysis.

Which club from these options do you prefer the most?

1 / 7

Labor Rights Protection	The club has delayed salaries and used dual contracts	The club operates stably, meeting basic labor and contractual obligations
Product/Service Quality Enhancement	The club demonstrates strict contractual compliance with partners and consistent consumer rights protection	The club demonstrates strict contractual compliance with partners and consistent consumer rights protection
Community Engagement	The club institutionalizes environmental initiatives including low-carbon lifestyle promotion and waste management campaigns	The club provides subsidized, high-quality fitness training services to the community
Fair Play Promotion	The club has been penalized by state authorities for match-fixing and bribery violations	The club maintains full compliance with league regulations without recent violations
Sport Development	The club maintains average performance with a partial youth training system and occasional national team callups	The club achieves top-tier performance through its well-developed youth training system, and has consistently multiple players for national team
Economic Development Contribution	The club maintains financial stability while generating moderate employment, although with limited collaboration with local industries	The club operates with constrained finances, demonstrating minimal impact on local employment and supply chain development
	Select	Select

Figure 1. Example of a virtual scenario in the conjoint experiment.

This experimental design effectively ensures the validity of the conjoint analysis, while the relatively detailed attribute settings and data collection procedures enhance the prediction accuracy regarding public preferences.

3.3. Data Collection and Sample Description

Since professional sports clubs in China are so diverse, for this study, we focused specifically on 36 clubs from the Chinese Super League (CSL) and the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA). These were selected for two reasons: first, football and basketball were the earliest sports to undergo professionalization reforms in China and have relatively strong grassroots foundations and market potential [50]; second, clubs operating in top-tier leagues consistently attract public attention, making their CSR initiatives more influential [51]. Moreover, since local residents in clubs' host cities are more likely to become supporters and revenue generators for teams [52], this study targets residents in the 22 cities that host these professional sports clubs.

To capture potential heterogeneity in public responses to CSR across different demographic groups, we also collected basic demographic information, including gender, age, education level, occupation, and income level.

To increase the internal validity of the conjoint experiment, we adopted several methodological safeguards: the randomization of attribute-level order across profiles and choice tasks; the use of dominant profiles in warm-up tasks to detect inattentiveness; the filtering of respondents with completion times below 4 min or inconsistent responses across identical test pairs; and the evaluation of consistency metrics across respondent-level part-worth estimates.

A total of 1043 valid responses were collected. Among these respondents, 48.99% were aged between 26 and 40, 43.24% were female, 56.28% held a bachelor's degree or higher, 55.22% reported annual income between 100,000 and 200,000 RMB, 87.92% identified as Han Chinese, and 56.3% resided in southern China.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Analysis of the Public's Preference for CSR of Professional Sports Clubs

Figure 2 presents the results of the choice-based conjoint analysis in a visual format, displaying both importance levels and utility values. The importance level for each attribute represents the average score across all 1043 respondents. The results indicate that "labor rights protection" is the most influential CSR dimension shaping public preference (28.64%), followed by "product/service quality enhancement" (19.51%). The next most important dimension is "fair play promotion" (17.01%), "sport development" (14.07%), "economic development contribution" (12.73%), and "community engagement" (8.05%).

Similarly, the average utility values for different CSR activity types within each attribute were calculated across all respondents, reflecting their relative influence on decision-making. The results show that the utility of labor rights protection ranges from -0.227 to 0.118 (span = 0.345), product/service quality enhancement from -0.130 to 0.105 (span = 0.235), fair play promotion from -0.122 to 0.082 (span = 0.204), sport development from -0.087 to 0.082 (span = 0.169), economic development contribution from -0.096 to 0.057 (span = 0.153), and community engagement from -0.031 to 0.048 (span = 0.079).

In terms of utility differences across CSR attribute levels, the gap between low and medium levels is significantly greater than that between medium and high levels. For example, for the labor rights protection attribute, the utility increase from low (-0.227) to medium (0.109) is 0.336 , whereas the increase from medium (0.109) to high (0.118) is only 0.009 .

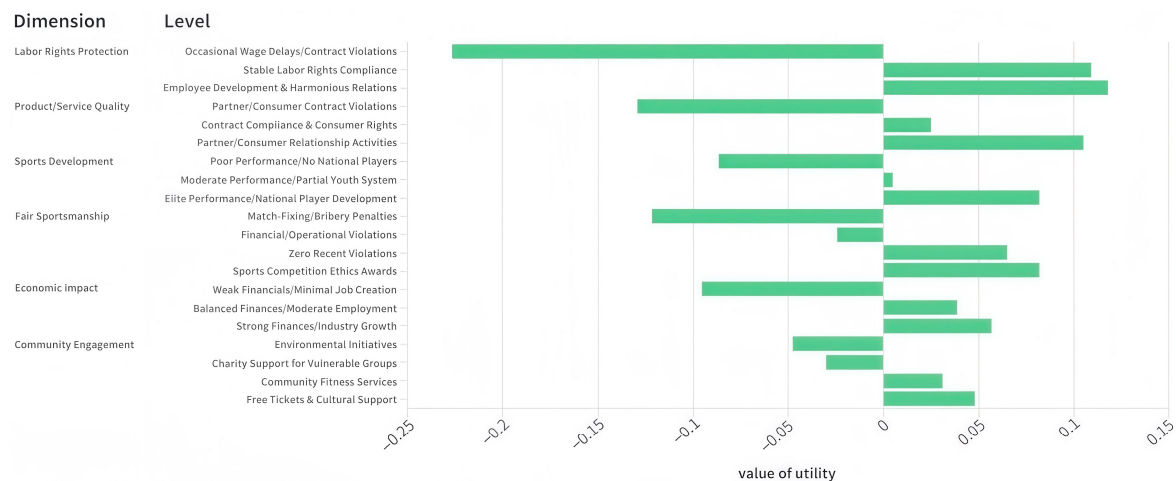


Figure 2. The utility values of the conjoint analysis based on selection.

This pattern is observed for most attributes, including product/service quality enhancement, economic development contribution, and fair play promotion. However, for the attributes of sport development and community engagement, the differences between levels are less pronounced, indicating a more balanced distribution.

4.2. Cluster Analysis of CSR Preferences Among Different Groups of Professional Sports Clubs

To further explore the heterogeneous preferences for different CSR activities of professional sports clubs among various groups, we conducted a cluster analysis using the K-Means algorithm on the basis of respondents' choice data, with the aim of grouping respondents with maximally similar preference patterns. Previous studies, such as those by Skouloudis et al. [53], have successfully employed the K-means algorithm to classify respondents' perspectives on CSR, demonstrating the methodological validity of this approach in this research domain.

On the basis of the importance respondents placed on each CSR attribute derived from the conjoint analysis, this study applied K-means clustering to categorize respondents into distinct groups. The number of clusters was determined using the silhouette method from the "cluster" package in R. As shown in Figure 3, the silhouette analysis indicated a local maximum in average silhouette width when the number of clusters was set to five. The subsequent K-means clustering analysis ($K = 5$) was conducted using the K-means function in the "stats" package in R, with a maximum of 1000 iterations and 1000 random starts to ensure robustness.

The results of the cluster analysis indicate that the 1043 respondents in the survey can be divided into five groups on the basis of their relatively similar preferences for CSR. Each group was labeled according to the importance they placed on different CSR dimensions: labor rights prioritizers, performance-driven advocates, ethic-focused supporters, community-embedded participants, and economy-boost enthusiasts.

Figure 4 shows the average importance levels of the CSR attributes across the five groups. The Labor Rights Prioritizers type respondents displayed a preference structure dominated by a single dimension, placing strong emphasis on whether clubs effectively safeguard labor rights protection (54.67%), followed by community engagement (18.97%). This group primarily consisted of individuals aged 26 to 40 years, and many of them worked as lawyers, teachers, and manual laborers.

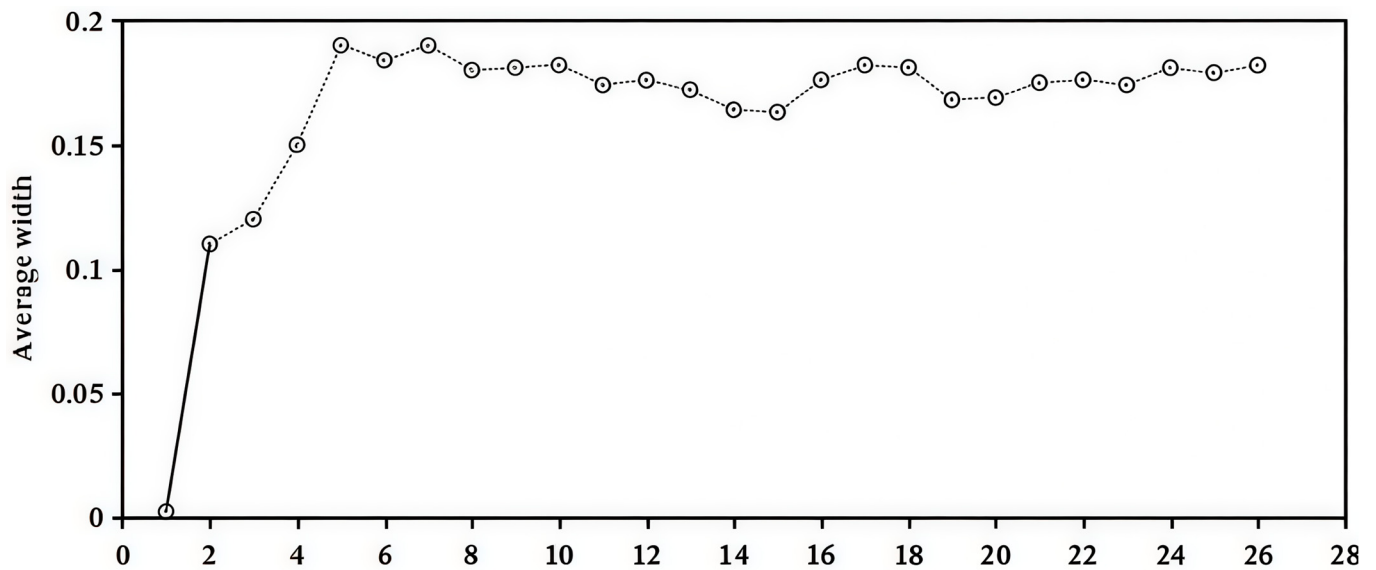


Figure 3. Clustering results using the silhouette method.

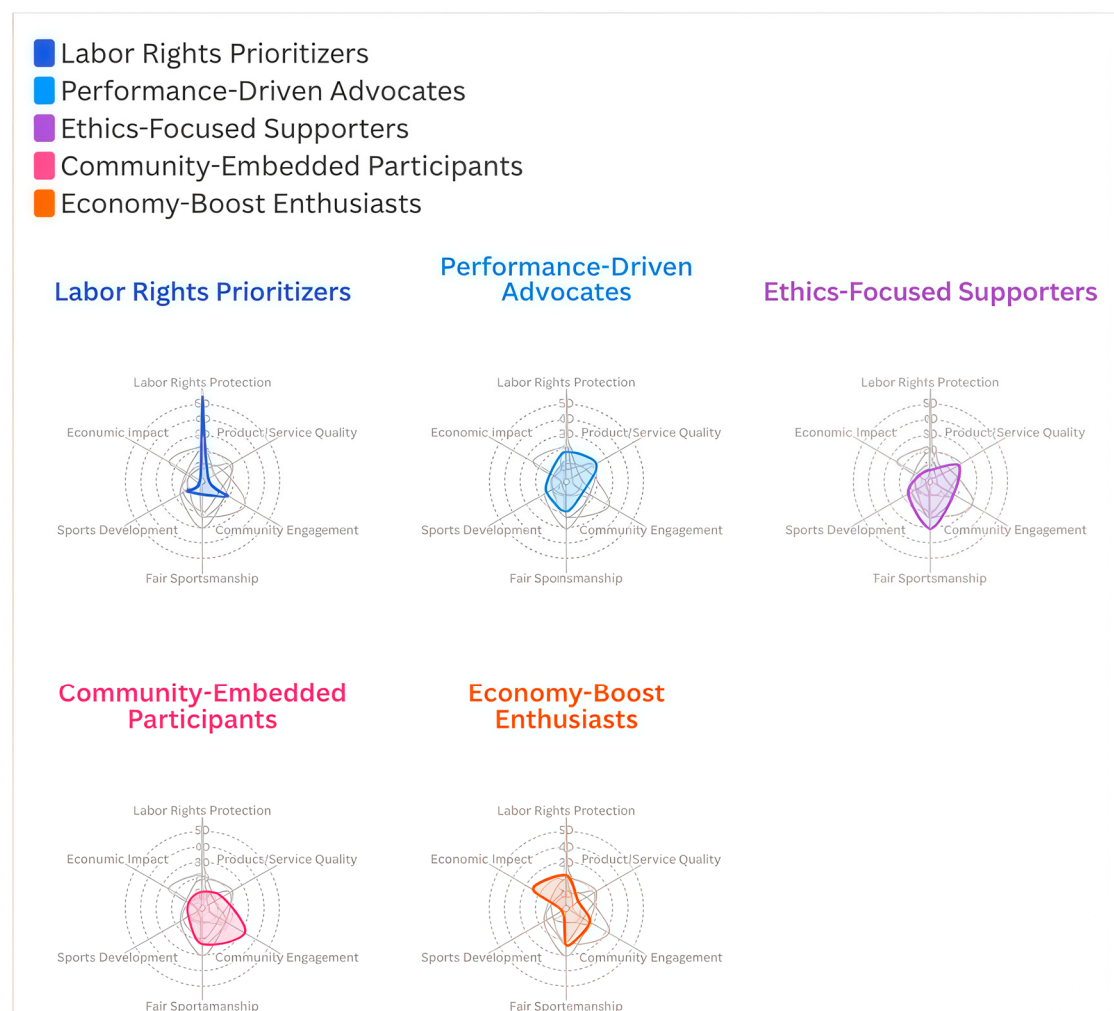


Figure 4. Five Categories of Groups Regarding CSR Preferences.

The Performance-Driven Advocates type respondents prioritized product/service quality enhancement (22.54%) as their main concern. They also paid substantial attention to fair play promotion (19.57%), labor rights protection (18.78%), and sport development (14.45%), presenting a well-balanced distribution across multiple attributes with a standard

deviation of only 6.7%. Most had a university degree or higher and belonged to the middle-income group.

The Ethic-Focused Supporters type respondents were characterized by a dual-core structure of “morality and quality,” with fair play promotion (30.63%) and product/service quality enhancement (20.77%) together accounting for more than half of the importance. Community engagement (17.26%) and sport development (16.49%) also received considerable attention. This group generally had moderate or low income and was composed predominantly of service workers and students.

The Analysis of the Community-Embedded Participants type respondents showed that community engagement (31.93%) and fair play promotion (22.99%) were the CSR attributes that they cared about most. Their favorite club activities included providing match tickets to the community and offering high-quality fitness guidance. This group included more female than male respondents and was largely composed of individuals with middle income levels.

The respondents in the Economy-Boost Enthusiasts group focused on whether clubs could contribute to economic development (25.02%). They also valued labor rights protection (21.40%) and community engagement (17.52%). Many in this group were self-employed individuals, sales professionals, or corporate managers.

5. Discussion

5.1. Key Findings and Empirical Interpretations

This study examined local public preferences regarding the CSR activities of professional sports clubs across six dimensions: labor rights protection, product/service quality enhancement, community engagement, fair play promotion, sport development, and economic development contribution. This represents the first study to use conjoint analysis to determine the utility and importance values of different CSR aspects in the context of professional sports clubs.

The results reveal that the three most influential CSR dimensions shaping public preference are labor rights protection, product/service quality enhancement, and fair play promotion. Notably, low performance levels in these attributes significantly suppress public preference. This suggests that when professional sports clubs frequently encounter negative CSR situations such as labor disputes, contractual breaches, or match-fixing, they may substantially undermine public trust and support behaviors. Conversely, high performance levels of these three attributes can effectively stimulate positive public preferences, including maintaining harmonious labor relations, offering career support for employees, regularly organizing consumer activities, and strictly adhering to fair competition rules. These findings resonate strongly with recent events in Chinese professional sports. For example, the high-profile case of the Wuhan Yangtze River Football Club (formerly Wuhan Zall) exemplifies the devastating impact of neglecting labor rights. Throughout 2021 and 2022, the club faced persistent allegations and confirmed reports of failing to pay player and staff salaries on time, leading to multiple penalties from the Chinese Football Association (CFA), including point deductions. This culminated in widespread fan protests, boycotts, and ultimately the club's dissolution in early 2023, demonstrating how labor rights violations can trigger a complete collapse of public trust and support, aligning precisely with our finding that low performance in this dimension exerts a powerful negative influence and that the public exercises a “veto right” against such transgressions. Similarly, the pervasive issue of match-fixing, starkly highlighted by extensive investigations and subsequent legal actions involving multiple clubs, players, and officials (including senior CFA figures) in recent years (e.g., the high-profile cases exposed since 2022), has severely damaged the credibility of the entire league system. These scandals have fueled deep public skepticism

and cynicism toward the integrity of competitions, confirming our finding that integrity violations carry extremely negative utility and significantly suppress public preference. The public outrage and loss of faith observed in these instances underscore the asymmetric impact of negative CSR behaviors, where trust, once lost, is exceedingly difficult to regain. These findings can also be interpreted from broader cultural, institutional, and consumer psychology perspectives. Specifically, China's collectivist culture and high-power distance context make the public particularly sensitive to procedural fairness, labor rights, and integrity issues [54,55]. Institutionally, the legacy of state-led sports governance in China contributes to an expectation that clubs should fulfill social functions beyond commercial operations, such as youth development and moral leadership [56]. From a consumer psychology perspective, the 'negativity bias' [57] explains why negative CSR practices (e.g., wage arrears, match-fixing) exert disproportionately stronger impacts on public attitudes compared with positive practices. Empirical studies in CSR also show that consumers penalize irresponsible behavior more heavily than they reward responsible behavior [13,28]. This cultural-institutional and psychological lens therefore reinforces our interpretation of the asymmetric effects of CSR behaviors, highlighting why certain CSR dimensions (e.g., labor rights, fair play) dominate public evaluations in China.

In fact, since China's professional sports reform in the late 20th century, while many clubs have implemented various CSR activities, negative news about labor disputes, contractual violations, and even match-fixing has remained frequent. According to our findings, these are precisely the critical CSR areas. Thus, if clubs or leagues aim to build public support through strategic CSR initiatives, they should prioritize these areas and resolutely curb negative behavior. Otherwise, they risk being perceived by the public as insincere or engaging in CSR merely for appearances.

Notably, sport development and economic development contributions emerged as relatively influential attributes. CSR activities related to sport development include improving team performance, perfecting youth training systems, and supporting national team development. These areas resonate strongly with the Chinese public, as competitive achievements, particularly on the international stage, are often viewed as symbols of national strength and pride, as well as core objectives of China's professional sports development. This dimension's significance is exemplified by clubs that have successfully integrated youth development with competitive success. A notable case is the Zhejiang Professional Football Club (Zhejiang Greentown). Historically recognized for its commitment to youth academies, Zhejiang has consistently produced talent for Chinese national teams while maintaining a competitive position in topflight (e.g., achieving promotion and establishing themselves in the CSL). This dedication to long-term player development aligns with public expectations for clubs to contribute to national sporting prowess, thereby enhancing local support and recognition, as reflected in the positive utility associated with high levels of sports development in our study [45].

Additionally, there is considerable value in the facilitation of local economic development, which includes creating jobs and boosting related industries. This suggests the growing public expectation that as China's professional sports industry continues to mature, it should deliver not only athletic achievements but also commercial and economic benefits.

Consistent with findings in the broader literature, our study also highlights community engagement as a highly recommended strategic CSR pathway for professional sports clubs. Among the community-related activities, the most favored are providing free tickets to local residents and offering youth education and quality fitness services. This aligns with scholars' view that enterprises should prioritize CSR activities related to their core business operations.

Cluster analysis reveals that respondents' CSR preferences are heterogeneous and can be categorized into five distinct types on the basis of relatively similar preferences: Labor Rights Prioritizers (245 respondents), Performance-Driven Advocates (215 respondents), Ethic-Focused Supporters (259 respondents), Community-Embedded Participants (167 respondents), and Economy-Boost Enthusiasts (157 respondents).

The Labor Rights Prioritizers group prioritizes whether clubs effectively safeguard employee rights and provide career development opportunities. For example, several professional clubs—such as Xinjiang Basketball Club and Wuhan Football Club—have been involved in contract disputes with players, exposing shortcomings in labor rights protection, including issues related to salary transparency and contract compliance. These disputes severely damaged the clubs' public image.

The concerns of the Performance-Driven Advocates group are centered around the services provided by clubs, team performance, and integrity in sportsmanship. Clubs such as Beijing Shougang and Guangdong Southern Tigers have been able to offer fans a high-quality viewing experience, consistently host engaging club events, and achieve strong league performance. They have also contributed numerous top athletes to national teams, thereby significantly enhancing public support.

The Ethic-Focused Supporters group primarily focuses on fair play and product quality. In recent years, several Chinese professional football clubs have been implicated in match-fixing scandals, with multiple players, officials, and even football association leaders being prosecuted for bribery and match manipulation. These incidents have triggered a serious crisis of trust among the public toward professional clubs and the league as a whole.

The Community-Embedded Participants group closely follows clubs' engagement in community development. In recent years, many professional sports clubs across Chinese cities have actively engaged in public service activities within local communities and schools. Through youth education programs, charity games, and the provision of match tickets, they have gradually gained recognition and appreciation from local residents.

The Economy-Boost Enthusiasts group focuses on whether clubs can contribute to local economic development. In cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, professional clubs have driven commercial development, created job opportunities, and stimulated related industries—meeting public expectations for economic growth.

In summary, this study employed conjoint analysis to investigate local public preferences regarding the CSR of professional sports clubs across six distinct attributes. Furthermore, cluster analysis was utilized to explore the variations in CSR preferences among different types of public groups.

5.2. Cross-National Comparison and Contextual Implications

The empirical findings of this study, which are based on the Chinese context, demonstrate that labor rights protection, product/service quality, and fair play promotion are the most influential CSR attributes shaping public preferences regarding professional sports clubs. These findings exhibit both context-specific and universal features compared with similar studies conducted in other national or regional contexts.

The international CSR literature in the sports domain has frequently emphasized environmental sustainability and community empowerment as dominant CSR domains. For example, Lerro et al. [24] conducted a conjoint analysis in Italy and reported that environmental protection and support for local agriculture were highly valued by consumers in food-related CSR, which aligns with broader EU policies emphasizing environmental and social responsibility. Similarly, Panthong and Taecharungroj [39], using a Thai sample, reported that CSR activities involving local identity, education, and environmental awareness were the most preferred by local residents. In contrast, our Chinese respondents placed a

significantly stronger emphasis on labor rights protection, reflecting heightened sensitivity to internal fairness, employment stability, and legal compliance—a finding that echoes the socioeconomic context of China, where labor disputes in the sports sector (e.g., delayed wages, dual contracts) have been widely reported and publicized in recent years.

From a cultural dimension perspective, Hofstede’s framework provides a valuable interpretive lens. China’s relatively high-power distance and collectivist orientation may explain the public’s preference for CSR activities that ensure procedural justice, contractual integrity, and structural fairness—such as labor protection and fair competition. In contrast, countries with stronger individualistic cultures may exhibit greater concern for CSR initiatives that promote personal empowerment (e.g., education, environmental choices, diversity and inclusion), as seen in CSR studies conducted in North America and Western Europe [13,58]. Furthermore, the legacy of state-led sports governance in China contributes to an institutional expectation that sports clubs should fulfill social functions such as public moral leadership and youth development beyond merely serving fans or shareholders.

Notably, community engagement received relatively low importance (8.05%) in the overall preference structure, a finding that contrasts with many Western contexts where community-based CSR is a central element of sports management strategies. This gap may be partially explained by the different development trajectories of professional sports systems. In Western countries, many sports clubs originate from grassroots community organizations and maintain deep-rooted ties with local populations. Conversely, many Chinese professional clubs were established through top-down administrative reforms and marketization processes, often with limited organic connections to surrounding communities. This institutional disconnect may reduce the perceived legitimacy or authenticity of their CSR activities in community settings.

Finally, the preference for economic development contribution as a CSR dimension in China also reflects the transitional stage of the Chinese sports industry. With increasing commercialization, the public has growing expectations that sports clubs can drive local employment, consumption, and tourism. This is consistent with recent government policy goals of integrating the sports sector with regional economic development, such as through “sports-led urban renewal” and “event economy” strategies.

Overall, the cross-national comparison highlights the importance of contextualizing CSR preferences within specific cultural, institutional, and developmental frameworks. While certain CSR principles may have global resonance, such as ethical governance and social contribution, their relative importance and manifestation vary across countries. Accordingly, CSR strategies in sports should avoid “one-size-fits-all” approaches and instead adopt localized, culturally informed frameworks that reflect the expectations of the domestic public.

5.3. Theory Contribution

First, this study expands the existing research on CSR in professional sports. Most previous CSR studies in the sports context have focused on consumer groups, such as fans [35,59]. However, we argue that the perspectives of the broader public on CSR are also highly important, as they not only are potential consumers but also directly influence consumer behavior through various channels. Second, the conjoint analysis method we employed has notable advantages in enhancing response authenticity and reducing social desirability bias. This helps address methodological limitations in previous studies while enabling a detailed analysis of the utility values and relative importance rankings of various CSR activities. Third, this study incorporates both positive and negative CSR practices of sports clubs into the analysis. This inclusive design allows for a more comprehensive and realistic assessment of public attitudes toward club CSR practices.

5.4. Practical Implications

Conjoint analysis is an appropriate tool for providing behavioral insights to business managers and CSR practitioners. This study, through conjoint analysis, offers important insights for club managers regarding how to strategically implement CSR activities. On the one hand, clubs must strictly avoid CSR violations such as match-fixing, labor rights infringements, breaches of contracts with sponsors, and violations of consumer rights. These behaviors can severely damage a club's reputation. Our findings show that the public often exercises a "veto right" when such negative behaviors occur. On the other hand, if clubs aim to strategically leverage CSR for operational improvement, they should focus on the most critical CSR attributes---such as providing career development opportunities for employees, regularly organizing events for consumers, cultivating sports talent for national teams (a dimension particularly resonant in the Chinese context where contributing to national glory is a key expectation), promoting employment and industrial development, distributing match tickets to local communities, and providing educational opportunities for youth. Additionally, tailoring activities on the basis of the preferences of different resident groups can increase operational efficiency. This necessitates an understanding of the specific sociocultural and institutional drivers of CSR preferences in China's evolving sports landscape. For example, in cities with large labor populations, clubs should prioritize strict contract compliance, transparent salary policies, and career development opportunities for employees. This aligns with prior evidence that labor rights are a fundamental driver of organizational legitimacy in transitional economies [26,30]. In middle-class, consumer-driven markets, emphasis should be placed on product/service quality, match-day experiences, and fan engagement activities, as these factors directly affect consumer satisfaction and loyalty [59]. In economically dependent cities, clubs should highlight their contributions to employment, tourism, and local industry development, which reflects broader findings on sports-led economic spillovers [52,60]. These differentiated approaches ensure that CSR strategies are both context-sensitive and operationally actionable, helping clubs to strategically position themselves within diverse sociocultural and economic environments.

6. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has two main limitations, which also suggest opportunities for future development. First, the conjoint analysis method used in this study is best suited for analyzing fewer than seven attributes. This necessitated the exclusion of certain CSR dimensions that might influence public perceptions, as well as some simplifications in the level settings of the included dimensions. Future research could conduct more detailed investigations into specific CSR attributes (e.g., exploring which types of community engagement activities local residents prefer) to gain deeper insights into public attitudes and expectations. Second, on the basis of the clustering results, the demographic and individual characteristics collected in this study remain somewhat limited, which restricts the ability to precisely identify group-specific preferences. Future studies could aim to gather more covariate data to construct richer and more multidimensional user profiles. This would help clubs and leagues develop more targeted and effective CSR strategies.

In addition, the replicability of this study in countries with socio-economic conditions close to China warrants discussion. In contexts such as South Korea and Japan, where professional sports clubs maintain closer community ties and more mature governance structures, it is expected that CSR preferences may show both similarities and differences. Similar to China, issues such as labor rights protection and fair play are likely to remain central concerns. However, due to the stronger grassroots origins of clubs in Japan and South Korea, community engagement might carry greater weight in shaping public pref-

erences. Therefore, future research should consider replicating this experiment in these countries to validate and extend the generalizability of our findings.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, C.W.; methodology, C.W.; software, C.W.; validation, C.W., J.S. and Z.W.; formal analysis, C.W.; data curation, C.W.; writing—original draft preparation, C.W.; writing—review and editing, C.W. and Z.W.; visualization, J.S.; project administration, J.S.; funding acquisition, C.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committee of College of P.E. and Sport (date of approval: 20 March 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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