

Does the Social Contribution of a Professional Sports Club Influence Team Loyalty among Child Participants?

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Abstract Research on the effects of social contribution activities of commercial entities on consumers' attitudes and behaviours has been conducted in business fields including sport fields. While there were numerous documentations between CSR and consumers' attitudes and behaviours, some researches have claimed that there were less significant relationships between CSR and consumers' attitudes and behaviours. This study aims to clarify the influence of social contribution activities of a professional sports club on team loyalty among child participants. This study focused on 'Soccer otodoketai', the original coaching method used for JEF United Ichihara Chiba, which belongs to the J League. This activity, which was intended for infants, kindergartners, and pupils, was characterised as an educational activity that accompanied football coaching. A questionnaire survey was conducted for elementary school and junior high school students who have previously participated in the 'Soccer otodoketai' class. A total of 789 questionnaires were distributed. Out of 636 (80.6%) responses, 634 (80.4%) were valid. Four research questions, derived from the results of previous studies, were examined. As a result of A one-way analysis of variance, participants who remembered participating in the 'Soccer otodoketai' class scored significantly higher in all the team loyalty items related to the experience of watching games and intentions at home stadiums than those who did not. Furthermore, the sum score of team loyalty showed a significant correlation coefficient with watching intentions at home stadiums. The results of this study quantitatively

clarified the relationship between the social contribution of a professional sports club and the formation of team loyalty among children. Those who remembered their past activities with the staff of a professional sports club could become loyal fans in their community. These results might provide evidence for grassroots activities implemented by professional sports clubs.

Keywords Professional Sports Club, Social Contribution, Team Loyalty, Children Participation

1. Introduction

1.1. CSR in Sport Settings

Commercial entities have performed social contribution activities in the context of corporate social responsibility (CSR) since the 1960s [1]. Regardless of sports, research on the effects of social contribution activities of commercial entities on consumers' attitudes and behaviours has been conducted in business fields. Positive relationships have also been established between social contribution activities and positive attitude toward companies. For example, Ricks [2] documented that a proactive condition of corporate philanthropy has an overall positive effect on consumer perceptions of corporate associations. In the sports field, Sutton et al. [3] claimed that professional sports teams and their players

played a significant role in building fan identification through community-based activities. In addition, Babiak and Wolfe [4] suggested, in the case of the national football league in the United States that CSR in sports might help in building the image of a professional sports league. While there were numerous documentations between CSR and consumers' attitudes and behaviours, it has been claimed that there were less significant relationships between CSR and consumers' attitudes and behaviours. Sen and Bhattacharya [5], for instance, noted that the efficacy of CSR depends on both, the CSR issues a company that chooses to focus on and individual-specific factors. Walzel et al. [6] reviewed 69 articles published from 2008 to 2017 and written in English of CSR in professional team sports organizations (PTSOs) and documented several findings. First of all, soccer was the most investigated single sports context for CSR research in PTSOs (n=28). Secondly, 55 studies adopted the instrumental citizenship perspective that conceptualizes CSR in functional terms as a mean to achieve organizational goals. Thirdly, 53 articles predominately came from North American and European countries. These findings indicate that it needs to address more Asian cases of CSR and PTSOs with regard to predominant sport such as soccer positively.

1.2. CSR in Football Settings in Japan

As mentioned above, taking Asia being a rising sporting continent into consideration, it would be important to demonstrate relationship between CSR and PTSOs. As Dolles and Söderman [7] mentioned, the J-League is a professional football league in Japan, with a history of 30 years, which was established with 10 clubs in 1991 and started with an opening match in 1993. Currently, 60 professional football clubs based in 41 prefectures in Japan are members of the J-League as of 2023. Eighteen clubs belong to J1 (top division), 22 clubs belong to J2 (second division), and 20 clubs belong to J3 (third division). Thus, the J-League has grown rapidly in the past 30 years. Before the J-League began, the football league in Japan was an amateur league constructed with company teams. Therefore, compared to baseball, which has a long history in Japan (the Japanese professional baseball league was established in 1935), football held a minor position in Japanese sports scenes. Following the commencement of the J-league, each of its clubs makes efforts to gain widespread acceptance among the community's residents. In fact, the league contract obligates each club to make a social contribution to their communities. As previously noted, studies have documented that the social activities of professional sports clubs have intangible and material benefits for the club and community.

Research on the social contribution of professional sports clubs, however, has been limited since the J-League commencement. Matsumura and Tohi [8] conducted one of the few studies on the social contribution of professional sports clubs in Japan, which examined the effects of

community activities in a professional sports club among visiting schools, attitudes towards teams, and athletes. There was a significant relationship between community activities and team loyalty, and no significant relationship between community activities and attendance behaviour at the stadium during a short period. Moreover, they concluded that grassroots activities, such as school visits by professional sports clubs, were important to enhance team loyalty among participants, especially for children. This viewpoint was emphasised as vital for the initial development of loyalty by Iwasaki and Havitz [9] and James [10]. Iwasaki and Havitz [9] offered a conceptual model to explain the relationships among involvement, psychological commitment, and loyalty. In addition to the conceptual model of Iwasaki and Havitz, James [10] examined when children first begin to demonstrate team loyalty, based on Piaget's [11] theory of cognitive development. He interviewed and tested children aged 5–6 and 8–9 and concluded that children demonstrated psychological and behavioural loyalty to their favourite team, although it depended on their level of cognitive development. According to Piaget's theory [11], cognitive development is divided into four phases: sensorimotor development, preoperational thought, concrete operations, and formal operations. James tested children between ages five and nine. They were positioned in preoperational thought and concrete operations based on Piaget's theory. However, James added a new category called the transitional phase between preoperational thought and concrete operations for Piaget's cognitive development framework. Children positioned in concrete thought demonstrated complete loyalty to their favourite team, but children in preoperational thought and transitional phase were not able to demonstrate loyalty to their favourite team. This research result indicated that the age of subjects for research, including children, should be considered.

1.3. Soccer Otodoketai

JEF United Ichihara Chiba, which belongs to the J-League, has continued its unique activity named 'Soccer otodoketai' as one of the social contribution activities for their community. 'Soccer otodoketai' activity was initially proposed by the general manager in 2002, and was intended for infants, kindergartners, and pupils. This activity involved visiting the football coaching of kindergartens and primary schools. The general manager stated the methodological difference between Japan and Europe in football coaching in his book [12]:

'Players do not try to take a risk, and do not try to take responsibility. This may be because there is a cause of coaching that confined the thoughts and actions of individuals'

He pointed out the poor independence of Japanese football players as a matter of sport education from early childhood and claimed that 'Soccer otodoketai' activity attempted to change the coaching trend in Japanese

football. This activity has been distinct from a business strategy to attract customers on a short-term basis, such as the distribution of free tickets, and has also been clearly distinct from the player development system, in terms of talent discovery. The staffs of ‘Soccer otodoketai’ expected children to make friends, play fair, as well as exhibit independence through this activity. This activity has been characterised as human education. A general football coaching in Japan usually focuses on progress of skills such as ways of ball kicking and controlling through program. On the other hand, ‘Soccer otodoketai’ method focuses on ways of communication as fexpressing children’s their independence through football practice. For example, one ‘Soccer otodoketai’ staff mentioned in the interview survey that ‘We recognise teachers are overwhelmed with quite a few things what they must do in the current school settings of elementary education. Therefore, they do not have time enough to wait for students to find their solutions in a lot of situations. We try to supplement a part of these situations through our program. Of course, we are careful of our program not to be self-righteous’ [13]. It seems that ‘Soccer otodoketai’ method is the antithesis of the coaching that focuses on skills and tactics.

According to Nakayama [13], the expense of this activity has been recorded in the annual budget of the Board of Education since 2004. Over twenty years have passed since the commencement of ‘Soccer otodoketai’, it has continued as of 2023. Although ‘Soccer otodoketai’ was initially recognised as passive CSR and an obligation in the club’s J-league contract, it was gradually accepted as strategic CSR. That is, it seems that the recognition of ‘Soccer otodoketai’ in the club changed from passive to strategic CSR. Therefore, it is important to examine the impact of the social contribution activities, such as ‘Soccer otodoketai’, on participants, including children.

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to clarify the influence of the social contribution of a professional sports club on team loyalty, more specifically, of ‘Soccer otodoketai’ by JEF United Ichihara Chiba. This study adopts one of Windsor’s four conceptual approaches for CSR— the instrumental citizenship perspective that conceptualizes CSR in functional terms as a mean to achieve organizational goals [14].

1.5. Research Questions

According to Sutton et al. [3] and Babiak and Wolfe [4], social contribution activities in sports have a positive impact on the organisations that carry them out. In addition, Matsumura and Tohi [8] reported that a professional sports club’s social activities had a significant positive relationship with team loyalty, but not a significant positive relationship with attendance behaviour at the stadium over

a short period. Based on the above arguments, it poses that the following four research questions:

RQ1: The experience of attending social contribution activities of a professional sports club in the past affects participants’ team loyalty.

RQ2: The experience of attending social contribution activities of a professional sports club in the past affects participants’ stadium attendance for watching games.

RQ3: The experience of attending social contribution activities of a professional sports club in the past affects the watching intentions of participants in the stadium.

RQ4: There is a relationship between team loyalty and watching intentions in games at home stadiums among those who previously attended social contribution activities of a professional sports club.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Subjects

Data were obtained from 634 samples of elementary school and junior high school students who had prior experience of participating in a ‘Soccer otodoketai’ class. Before collecting data, researcher confirmed informed consent for survey participants through the board of education at that city conducted survey. A questionnaire survey was conducted from 13 to 22 December 2011.

2.2. Measurement Items

The measurement items comprised 10 items in total.

Measurement items were 1) participation experiences in ‘Soccer otodoketai’ class (2 items), 2) team loyalty (3 items), 3) experience of watching games at home stadiums (2 items), 4) watching intentions at home stadium of JEF United Ichihara Chiba (1 item), and 5) age and gender (2 items).

Wakefield and Sloan [15] defined team loyalty as ‘an allegiance or devotion to a particular team’, and developed a team loyalty scale composed of 3 items. The reliability coefficient (Cronbach’ alpha) of that scale they had developed was .91. That scale estimated the attitudinal aspect of individuals to a particular team. To assess loyalty or identification to a particular team, there are scale constructed aspects both attitudinal and behavioural [16]. James [10], however, documented that it was difficult to evaluate behavioural aspect of loyalty to their favourite team of children. Therefore, I focused on measuring attitudinal aspect of team loyalty. I organised three items to measure team loyalty based on Wakefield and Sloan [15] to measure respondents’ attitude to the team. These were: 1) I am a devoted fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba, 2) I want to inform others that I am a fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba, and 3) I cheer for JEF United regardless of the team’s success or failure. One item under ‘watching intentions at home stadium’ was

'Would you like to watch the games of JEF United Ichihara Chiba at home stadium?' 'Team loyalty' and 'watching intentions at home stadium' were measured on a five-point scale from "completely disagree" to "completely agree".

2.3. Analytical Procedure

As a first step of analysis, the independent variable was divided into groups by the participation experience in a 'Soccer otodoketai' class. The dependent variables were team loyalty, number of games watched at home stadium, and watching intentions for home games at home stadium. Next, a significant difference test using analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed. ANOVA is a statistical method that determines whether there is a statistically significant difference between the mean values of multiple data groups obtained in a study, or whether it is an error. In this study, A one-way ANOVA was used to examine statistical significance between the independent variable (3 groups) and dependent variables: team loyalty, numbers of watching games and watching intentions. Finally, the correlation coefficient was calculated between the sum score of team loyalty and watching intentions of games at home stadiums.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics

There were 326 (51.6%) males and 308 (48.4%) females. The mean age was 13.2 (± 1.2), and the age range was eleven to fifteen. There were 478 (75.4%) 'yes' responses for 'otodoketai' class experience, 40 (6.3%) 'no' responses, and 116 (18.3%) 'do not remember' responses. The mean attendance for the 'otodoketai' activity was 4.33 (± 1.85). There were 118 (18.6) 'yes' responses for

experience of watching games at the home stadium of JEF United Ichihara Chiba. The mean number of games watched at home stadium was 0.68 (± 2.29) among a total sample. In addition, among those who responded 'yes' to the experience of watching games at the home stadium of JEF United Ichihara Chiba, the mean number was 3.48 (± 4.08). The mean number of watching intentions at home stadium was 2.79 (± 1.23).

3.2. Team Loyalty

Mean and standard deviation for each 'team loyalty' item among total sample was: 1) I am a devoted fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba 1.75 (± 1.02), 2) I want to inform others that I am a fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba 1.62 (± 0.91), 3) I cheer for JEF United regardless of the success or failure of the team 2.85 (± 1.33). The reliability of scale (Cronbach's alpha) was .737. Table 1 shows the result of A one-way ANOVA for team loyalty by participation experiences in 'Soccer otodoketai' classes. It shows significant differences in three items measuring team loyalty among three groups; and in the case of sum score as well. As a result of multiple comparisons, in items 1, 3 and sum score, those who responded 'yes' showed high scores and appeared highly loyal to the team.

3.3. Experiences of Watching Games at Home Stadium

Table 2 shows the results of A one-way ANOVA for experiences of watching games at the home stadium by participation experience in 'soccer otodoketai'. Those who responded 'yes' for the question showed high scores, while the number of games they had watched at home stadium was under 1 time. As a result of multiple comparisons, those who responded 'yes' showed significantly high numbers scores compared with the 'no' and 'do not remember' groups.

Table 1. A one-way ANOVA for team loyalty items by Participation in "Soccer otodoketai" class experience

Team loyalty items	Participation in "Soccer otodoketai" class experience			F Value	Multiple comparisons (p<.05)
	Yes (n=478)	No (n=40)	Do not remember (n=116)		
	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)		
1) I am a devoted fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba.	1.84 (1.05)	1.38 (0.70)	1.53 (0.92)	F[2, 631]=7.36**	Yes > No, Do not remember
2) I want to inform others that I am a fan of JEF United Ichihara Chiba.	1.67 (0.93)	1.43 (0.75)	1.47 (0.88)	F[2, 631]=3.22*	No significant differences
3) I cheer for JEF United regardless of the team's success or failure.	2.97 (1.32)	2.68 (1.19)	2.42 (1.33)	F[2, 631]=8.63***	Yes > Do not remember
Sum score of team loyalty items	6.47 (2.71)	5.47 (2.01)	5.41 (2.54)	F[2, 631]=9.26***	Yes > No, Do not remember

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 2. A one-way ANOVA for numbers of watching games at home stadium by Participation in “Soccer otodoketai” class experience

Item	Participation in “Soccer otodoketai” class experience			F Value	Multiple comparisons (p<.05)
	Yes (n=478)	No (n=40)	Do not remember (n=116)		
	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)		
Numbers of watched games at home stadium	0.88 (2.59)	0.00 (0.00)	0.08 (0.49)	$F[2, 630]=7.76^{***}$	Yes > No, Do not remember

*** $p<.001$ **Table 3.** A one-way ANOVA for watching intentions at home stadium by Participation in “Soccer otodoketai” class experience

Item	Participation in “Soccer otodoketai” class experience			F Value	Multiple comparisons (p<.05)
	Yes (n=478)	No (n=40)	Do not remember (n=116)		
	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)	MEAN (S.D.)		
Would you like to watch the games of JEF United Ichihara Chiba at home stadium?	2.95 (1.21)	2.20 (0.93)	2.34 (1.23)	$F[2, 631]=17.29^{***}$	Yes > No, Do not remember

*** $p<.001$

3.4. Watching Intentions at Home Stadium

Table 3 shows the results of A one-way ANOVA for watching intentions at home stadium by participation experience in ‘soccer otodoketai’. As a result of multiple comparisons, those who responded, ‘yes’ to the question of participation for the ‘soccer otodoketai’ class indicated a significantly high value, compared with the ‘no’ and ‘do not remember’ groups.

3.5. Relationship between Team Loyalty and Watching Intentions of Games

The correlation coefficient was calculated between the sum score of team loyalty and watching intentions of games at home stadiums. The coefficient was .619 ($p<.001$), showing a significant positive relationship between them.

4. Discussion

Based on Piaget’s cognitive theory, James [10] tested the relationship between cognitive development and demonstrating loyalty to a favourite sport team among children and discovered that children positioned in concrete thought demonstrated complete loyalty to their favourite team, whereas children positioned in preoperational thought and the transitional phase were unable to do so. James’s findings made us sensitive to research including children. In this study, we collected data from adolescents, aged 11–15 years, who did not refrain from demonstrating loyalty to their favourite things.

As Table 1 indicates, team loyalty scores of participants

for social contribution activities showed higher values than those who did not participate in and did not remember. Some participants were questioned three years after attending ‘otodoketai’ classes. These findings would lead teams to engage in grassroots activities such as ‘soccer otodoketai’. These activities have the potential to increase participant team loyalty, which in turn has the potential to influence stadium viewing intentions, because those who answered ‘yes’ to the question about ‘otodoketai’ experiences had significantly higher scores for watching intentions at the home stadium at JEF United Ichihara Chiba, as shown in Table 3. Brink et al. [17] found that strategic cause-related marketing significantly enhanced brand loyalty for consumers. Additionally, the relationship between team loyalty and watching intention of games showed a high correlation coefficient. This result indicates that activities that enhance someone’s team loyalty could drive their intention to watch games at home stadiums.

On the other hand, Table 2 shows a lower majority of individuals watching games at home stadiums, despite the fact that those who answered ‘yes’ to the question about ‘Soccer otodoketai’ class experience watched a significantly higher number of games at home stadiums. It seems to be difficult for children to manage their money when they visit stadiums to watch games; however, this point is contingent upon their guardian purchasing tickets. However, as sociologists and consumer behaviour researchers refer to so-called reverse socialisation, Hyatt et al. [18] reported the possibility that children could be agents for their parents’ sports fandom. The social contribution activities of professional sports clubs at schools might encourage team loyalty in child participants. Therefore, all of the research questions I listed were

accepted. Although this research applied a cross-sectional research design, these results indicated a close relationship between the social contribution activities of a professional sports club and team loyalty in the case of Asian PTSOs. Hence, this relationship should be tested using a longitudinal research design.

5. Conclusions

The results of this study quantitatively clarified the relationship between the social contribution of a professional sports club and team loyalty. Those who remembered their past activities with the staff of a professional sports club could become loyal fans in their community. These results might provide evidence for grassroots activities implemented by professional sports clubs. Future research based on longitudinal research design is required to comprehend the relationship between social contribution activities of professional sports clubs and team loyalty.

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Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict to declare.

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