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## Exploring Key Factors Influencing Sports Enthusiasts' Purchase of Sponsored Brands

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### Abstract

This research examines the purchasing intentions of soccer enthusiasts in China regarding products from sports sponsorship brands, extending the theory of planned behavior. The main goal is to evaluate how attitudes, subjective norms, brand identification, perceived brand quality, and corporate social responsibility influence these intentions. Data were gathered from 321 active soccer players using a structured questionnaire and analyzed with confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Results show that attitudes, subjective norms, brand identification, and perceived brand quality significantly affect purchasing intentions. Furthermore, attitudes partially mediate the relationships between subjective norms, brand identification, perceived brand quality, and purchasing intentions. Corporate social responsibility also emerges as a vital factor, shaping brand identification, which in turn influences purchasing behavior. The findings indicate that sports sponsorship brands can increase purchasing intentions by enhancing product quality, engaging in corporate social responsibility, and fostering strong brand identification. This study offers a fresh perspective by applying the theory of planned behavior within the sports sponsorship context, enriching both theoretical insights and practical strategies. The results provide valuable recommendations for brand managers aiming to boost consumer engagement and loyalty through sponsorship initiatives.

**Keywords:** Brand Identification; Perceived Brand Quality; Sports Enthusiasts; Theory of Planned Behavior; Corporate Social Responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

With the trend of normalization of the COVID-19 epidemic, consumers are increasingly interested in healthy lifestyles, which predicts an increasing demand for sports-branded products. Studies indicate that, in recent years, one of the sports industry's most valuable assets is its branding [1], as strong brands build consumer trust even in intangible purchases [2]. Sports brands are mainly Federations, Leagues, Teams, Athletes, Events, etc., which also include commercial brands or sponsors [3], such as Adidas, Nike, and other sports sponsorship brands. Accordingly, in today's society, with the growing emphasis on a healthy lifestyle, there is a continuous rise in demand for sports brands in the market. This paper seeks to discuss health-related topics on social media. It investigates public perceptions of sports sponsorship and related brands and analyzes how social media activities can shape consumer perceptions of sports brands and sponsors. On social media platforms, netizens form shared health communities by posting about their sports experiences, fitness achievements, and lifestyles. Brands can utilize this social environment to boost brand awareness through sports sponsorship activities. For example, by collaborating on fitness challenges, sponsoring sports events, or sharing health-related information, brands can actively engage in netizens' daily conversations.

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Sponsorship is an important marketing channel that has helped many industries increase consumer awareness of particular brands [4]. Sponsors also outmaneuver competitors by sponsoring entities (e.g., events, teams, or athletes) connected to their sports brand structure [5, 6], which enhances the assets of the sponsoring company [7] and increases consumer purchase intention (PI) for sponsored brands [8]. Most studies on sports sponsorship brands focus on global brands sponsoring sports programs, such as the Olympics and other major sporting events [5, 9]. However, the effectiveness of sports sponsorship brands on sports or competitions regularly attended by grassroots sports enthusiasts is less studied. Thus, the PI and influencing factors of sports sponsorship brands among regular sports enthusiasts, who represent the general population, must be examined. For example, Kelme is a Spanish sports brand that began sponsoring school soccer in China in 2016, aiming to use school culture and college matches as entry points to promote the dynamic and fun lifestyles of young people. After a few years of development, Chinese school soccer has attracted many soccer lovers who regularly participate in games or competitions. These enthusiasts not only use Kelme brand products during soccer games but also incorporate them into their studies, work, and daily lives. As a globally integrated sports sponsorship brand, Kelme seems to have a unique appeal in China and has become a standard for Chinese soccer enthusiasts. This study explores the PI and the influence of Chinese soccer enthusiasts on the brand's products.

The theory of planned behavior (TPB) is widely utilized in customer behavior research to clarify the factors that impact PIs [10, 11]. Originally developed by Ajzen [12], TPB suggests that individual actions are determined by three primary elements: attitudes (ATT), societal norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC) [13]. Research has confirmed TPB's effectiveness in forecasting consumer buying behavior across different industries. For instance, researchers have used TPB to analyze consumer intent in purchasing branded sportswear, demonstrating that both ATT and SN play a crucial role in decision-making [14, 15]. Likewise, a study expanded TPB's scope by applying it to green consumption, further proving the model's strength in predicting intention-based actions [16]. However, despite its extensive use in consumer research, there is a noticeable gap in its application to sports sponsorship brands. For example, while one study explored TPB's effect on sports fans' purchasing decisions, few empirical studies have focused on how regular sports enthusiasts form PIs for sponsored brand products [17]. This study addresses that gap by using TPB to explore the relationships between ATT, SN, and PBC in shaping soccer fans' purchasing decisions regarding sports-sponsored brands. TPB has been extensively applied in PI-relevant models. As an expectancy-value model, it uses PI as a key construct for forecasting behavior [12] and has successfully predicted various intentions and behaviors, such as leisure activities [18], foreign branded goods [19], branded apparel [20-22], and green consumption [23, 24]. However, although numerous TPB studies exist, fewer are relevant to sports sponsorship brands. This study applies TPB to explain and predict soccer enthusiasts' intentions to purchase products from sports sponsorship brands.

Substantial research shows that Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) significantly influences consumer PI, with customers increasingly drawn to brands that reflect ethical and social commitments [16]. CSR initiatives often foster brand loyalty and trust by demonstrating a company's commitment to societal welfare [25]. For instance, CSR strengthens brand equity by shaping positive consumer ATT, which, in turn, encourages PI [16]. CSR aligns with consumer values and deepens the connection between the consumer and the brand, positively impacting purchase intentions [26]. Although prior research has primarily focused on CSR's direct effects on PI, limited attention has been given to examining how factors like consumer ATT, social influence, or brand perceptions might mediate this relationship [27]. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the mediating effects of variables that influence the CSR-PI connection, thus enhancing the understanding of how CSR strategies can effectively drive consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior in competitive environments. Recently, CSR has received increased public attention as society progresses. CSR is considered a managerial responsibility to take measures that protect and improve both social and corporate interests [28]. More companies are adopting CSR activities to strengthen customer relationships [29], improve company reputation, and create competitive advantages [30]. As many companies adopt hybrid brand strategies, studying social responsibility from the brand perspective becomes even more essential [31]. Following the COVID-19 era, brand identification (BID) has become a critical aspect of brand management. Consumers tend to use products or brands that reflect their identity and emphasize their uniqueness [32]. BID is defined as a psychological process that models the intensity of the enduring association between the brand and the end user [33, 34]. Previous research has shown that consumer identification processes significantly influence individual consumer behavior, including brand loyalty and a higher likelihood of repurchasing [35, 36]. In the marketing environment, customers reflect and reinforce their self-identified brands through recognition and association [29]. Other studies suggest that consumers' perceptions of CSR significantly impact BID [26]. However, research on the relationship between consumers' perceptions of CSR in sports sponsorship brands, brand identity, and PI remains limited.

Perceived quality is consumers' assessment of a product's merit [37]. It has become an important business focus and a significant strategic consideration [38]. Perceived quality is one of the key factors in consumers' brand preferences [39] and a direct prerequisite for PI [40, 41]. Relevant research has discovered a significant association between perceived quality and PI [42]. Soccer enthusiasts tend to be more pragmatic, making perceived brand quality (PBRQ) an important factor. Therefore, this study correlates customers' perceptions of CSR, BID, and perceived quality with the TPB framework of attitude and intention to construct an integrated model that better analyzes the consumption intentions and influencing factors of Chinese soccer enthusiasts toward sports sponsorship brand products, providing a reference for brand promotion.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

TPB was first introduced in 1985 as an expansion of the theory of rational behavior to better comprehend the diversity of human conduct [43], which posits that there are three independent contributing factors of a person's behavioral intent, namely ATT, SN, and PBC. This theoretical model has been widely applied in many studies where researchers have attempted to predict behavior by identifying the motivating factors of reasoning processes [44, 45]. For instance, TPB has been used in the apparel consumption domain to predict consumers' PI [24, 46] as well as in studies on sports brand product consumption [22, 47]. Eddosary et al. [48], for example, used TPB to evaluate the intentions of Saudi Arabian fans to attend soccer matches.

ATT indicates an individual's positive or negative opinion. It is also considered a function of principles that connect with probable outcomes of the conduct, referred to as behavioral beliefs [49]. Consumers' ATT toward brands depends on their perceptions of the brand and can predict their behavior toward it [50]. Past studies have shown that consumers' ATT towards brands positively influences PI [51]. Watts & Chi [52] found that ATT significantly impacted consumers' PI for activewear in the US, and Song et al. [47] argued that consumers' ATT toward sports smart products correlated significantly with their ongoing intentions. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that consumers' ATT toward sports-sponsored brand products will influence their PIs.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Consumers' attitudes about sports sponsorship brands significantly impact PI.

SN reflects individuals' perceptions of how other important people in their lives (e.g., peers, friends, or family members) expect them to engage in behavior [12]. The concept of SN reflects the social influence that decision-makers feel when considering whether to perform a behavior [53]. Individuals' motivation to participate in group activities depends on ATT and behaviors influenced by SN [54]. Previous studies have confirmed that SN affects PI for branded clothing [20]. In sports brands, Byon et al. [55] found that SN predicted PI in a study on products sponsored by the World Cup, with consistent findings for both US and Korean consumers. People are more likely to be influenced by ingroup information than by outgroup information [56], and this influence grows when group membership is significant [57]. Soccer enthusiasts often play matches or participate in related activities, making them susceptible to the influence of organizers, captains, and teammates in soccer tournaments. Therefore, this study suggests that SN will influence consumers' ATT and PIs toward sports-sponsored brand products.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Consumers' SN about sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts PI.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Consumers' SN regarding sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts ATT.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Consumers' SN regarding sports sponsorship brands has a mediating effect on PI through ATT.

PBC can be defined as "the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the individual's behavior" [12, 49]. PBC is an accessible control belief that can either facilitate or hinder behavior. Research indicates that PBC has a significant impact on the PI for foreign-brand clothing [58, 59]. When soccer enthusiasts have more resources and opportunities related to sports sponsorship brands, they expect fewer obstacles; that is, the stronger their perceived behavioral control, the greater their intention to purchase. Therefore, this study proposes that PBC affects consumers' PI for sports-sponsored brand products.

Hypothesis 5 (H5): Consumers' PBC regarding sports-sponsored brands significantly impacts PI.

### 2.2. Customers' Perceptions of CSR and Brand Identification

CSR is defined as "context-specific organizational actions and policies that take into account stakeholders' expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance" [60]. A corporation's commitment to promoting its socially responsible actions can have various outcomes, including consumer identification with the company [61]. Bhattacharya and Sen [29] argue that consumer behavior is largely influenced by their perceptions of corporate socially responsible behavior (CSR). When the area of CSR action aligns with consumers' values, they are more inclined to identify with the company [62]. Consumers' perceptions of CSR have a significant impact on their brand identity [26, 63].

BID is a crucial construct for understanding consumer behavior [32]. Bhattacharya and Sen [29] extended the identity model to the relationship between consumers and corporations, arguing that companies with desirable identities can partially fulfill consumers' self-definition needs. Previous research suggests that consumers can identify with brands they perceive as compatible with their self-concepts [64] and that they satisfy their need for self-conformity through similarity or congruence between their self-concepts and the brands they associate with [35]. Marketing researchers argue that brands, as symbols of consumer goods, are important in creating and communicating consumer identities [35, 65]. BID has been shown to positively impact consumers' PI [66], and related studies have also shown that BID positively affects consumers' ATT toward a company [29]. Additionally, ATT has a mediating role between BID and PI [67]. In the area of sports brands, fans' identification has been found to influence both their ATT toward a sports brand [68] and their PI [69]. When soccer fans perceive a sports sponsorship brand as socially responsible, this may foster their identification with the brand, which, in turn, may influence their ATT and PI. Based on this, the following research hypotheses are proposed.

Hypothesis 6 (H6): Consumers' perception of CSR of sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts their BID.

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Consumers' BID with sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts ATT.

Hypothesis 8 (H8): Consumers' BID with sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts PI.

Hypothesis 9 (H9): Consumers' BID with sports sponsorship brands has a mediating effect on PI through ATT.

Hypothesis 10 (H10): Customers' perceptions of CSR have a mediating effect on PI through consumers' BID.

Hypothesis 11 (H11): Customers' perceptions of CSR have a mediating effect on PI through consumers' BID and ATT.

### 2.3. Perceived Brand Quality (PBRQ)

PBRQ reflects the client's judgment of the quality of a purchased product, which affects the customer's perception of the product or brand [38]. PBRQ is similar to perceived appeal, which can be defined as “the consumer's overall assessment of the utility of a product (or service) based on the consumer's perception of what is received and given” [37]. A customer's PBRQ is built on product quality; thus, when product quality issues arise, they deeply impact customers' perceived quality.

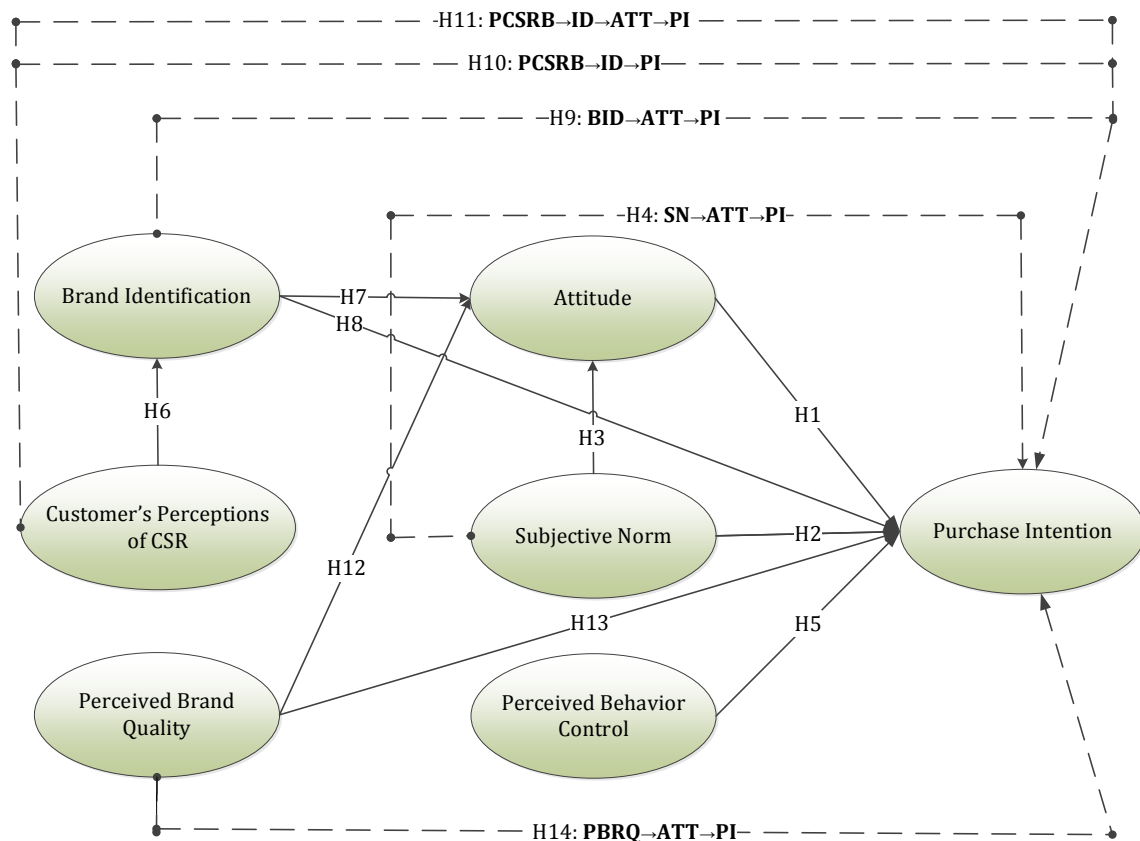
Previous studies have shown that consumers' perceived quality can predict PI [41, 70]. In the sports brand sector, Chi & Kilduff [71] found that the product quality of sportswear is an important factor influencing PI. PBRQ often influences customers to purchase particular products by differentiating the brand from the competition [38]. ATT toward brands and PBRQ are positively correlated [40, 72]. Additionally, perceived product value has a positive effect on ATT [73, 74]. García-Fernández et al. [75] found that the PBRQ of inexpensive fitness centers positively impacts consumer satisfaction. For football enthusiasts, the quality of sports sponsorship brand products is of particular importance. Therefore, this study concluded that consumers' PBRQ would influence their ATT and PI toward purchasing sports-sponsored brand products. Accordingly, we presented three research hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis 12 (H12): Consumers' PBRQ of sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts ATT.

Hypothesis 13 (H13): Consumers' PBRQ of sports sponsorship brands significantly impacts PI.

Hypothesis 14 (H14): Consumers' PBRQ of sports sponsorship brands has a mediating effect on PI through ATT.

According to the above discussion, the research framework is shown in Figure 1.



NOTE: Solid line= direct impact; dotted line= indirect impact

Figure 1. Theoretical model

### 3. Research Methodology

#### 3.1. Measurement Scales

TPB is based on Ajzen's [12] study and was adapted as needed. According to TPB guidelines, PI was measured using four items, with the representative question being "I am very likely to buy a Kelme brand product." ATT was measured using four semantic differential items, with the representative question being, "I think buying a Kelme brand product is something I look forward to". Subjective norm was measured using five items, with the representative question being, "My friends who play soccer around me often recommend Kelme brand products to me". PBC was measured using three items with the representative question being "For me, the process of purchasing a Kelme brand product is easy". According to Tuškej et al. [33], BID was measured by three items, with the representative question being "I have a lot in common with other people who use this brand". The measurement items about PCSR were adapted from Hur, et al. [63]. According to Sweeney and Soutar and Zhou et al. [74, 76], we used three items to measure PBRQ, with the representative question being "I think the quality of Kelme brand products is good". All measurement items in this research were scored on a seven-point Likert scale.

#### 3.2. Sampling

The study utilized purposive sampling to include a wide range of soccer enthusiasts from various regions within China. By selecting specific subgroups based on factors such as geographic location, socioeconomic status, and community type, this sampling technique aimed to capture a diverse array of consumer behaviors and perspectives regarding sports sponsorship brands [77]. This approach helped address potential regional differences in brand perception and consumer preferences, mitigating the limitations of previous studies that focused on more homogeneous samples [78]. The purposive sampling ensured representation from both urban and rural areas, as well as individuals from varied cultural and economic backgrounds [79]. Consequently, the study's findings offer broader applicability across China's diverse soccer communities, contributing to a deeper understanding of the key aspects influencing PIs of sports sponsorship brands.

Purposive sampling was used to conduct the survey, which was implemented based on the respondents' subjective reasoning of the respondents to select the most appropriate sample for this study [77]. To accurately measure consumer perceptions of the study variables, the questionnaires were completed by consumers who had experience with Kelme brand products and were regular soccer enthusiasts (with a relatively regular weekly frequency, duration, and intensity of soccer). These soccer enthusiasts regularly participated in various soccer games at formal soccer fields. Kelme sponsored some of these matches, which continued even in the colder winter months. The survey targeted 350 respondents, of which 345 responses were returned. After removing invalid samples, 321 valid questionnaires were retained.

Figure 2, shows the flowchart of the research methodology through which the objectives of this study were achieved.

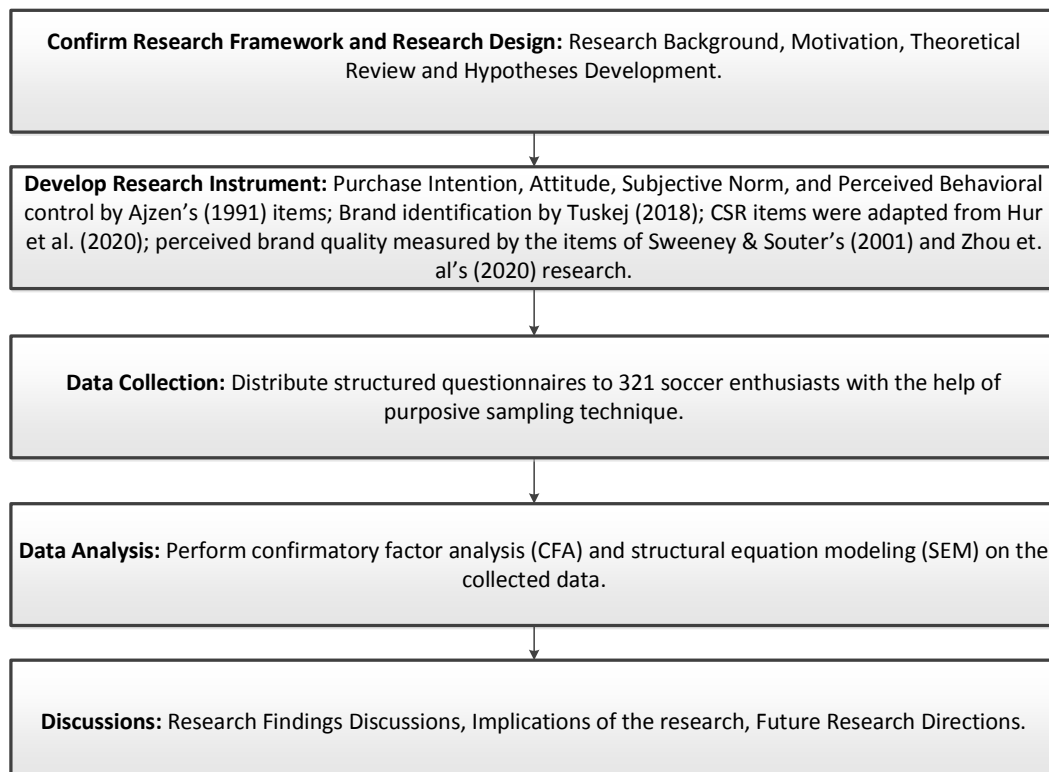


Figure 2. Methodology Flowchart

The majority of respondents were men (283 or 88.16%), most were between the ages of 21 and 30 (82.86%), and most had graduated from university (67.91%). Among consumers, 40.19% buy more than RMB 1,000 in Kelme brand products per year. Additionally, 39.56% of consumers have five years of soccer experience, 72.27% play soccer once or more per week, 51.09% exercise for more than two hours each time, and 61.68% exercise at a moderate or higher intensity each time. These consumers were more familiar with sports sponsorship brand products, making the sample suitable for this study.

## 4. Data Analysis

### 4.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

The empirical data in this study was evaluated using a two-stage approach [80]. This study employed Anderson and Gerbing's approach for confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). As shown in Table 1, each measurement item has a standardized factor loading greater than 0.7, with composite reliability (CR) exceeding 0.6 and average variance extracted (AVE) higher than 0.5, thus meeting the acceptable thresholds [81], which indicates that the CFA has proper convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was tested to detect the degree of discrimination between the latent variables and other constructs. Table 2 illustrates that the highest correlation coefficients for the dimensions were below the smallest square root of the AVE [81], suggesting that the proposed model reached the discriminant validity.

**Table 1. Reliability and Convergent Validity**

Factor	Item	Factor loading	z -value	CR	AVE
Attitude (ATT)	ATT1	0.878	19.466	0.917	0.735
	ATT2	0.900	20.290		
	ATT3	0.849	18.454		
	ATT4	0.798	16.809		
Subjective Norm (SN)	SN1	0.732	14.223	0.849	0.586
	SN2	0.817	16.503		
	SN3	0.808	16.268		
	SN4	0.698	13.372		
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	PBC1	0.805	16.711	0.892	0.735
	PBC2	0.949	21.201		
	PBC3	0.810	16.867		
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1	0.829	17.263	0.877	0.642
	PI2	0.804	16.517		
	PI3	0.820	17.017		
	PI4	0.749	14.949		
Perceptions of CSR (PCSR)	PCSR1	0.713	12.432	0.770	0.527
	PCSR2	0.715	12.463		
	PCSR3	0.749	13.024		
Brand Identification (BID)	BID1	0.750	14.904	0.866	0.684
	BID2	0.882	18.367		
	BID3	0.843	17.297		
Perceived Brand Quality (PBRQ)	PBRQ1	0.833	16.559	0.847	0.651
	PBRQ2	0.870	17.489		
	PBRQ3	0.708	13.635		



**Table 2. Discriminant Validity**

Construct	PCSR	BId	PI	PBRQ	PBC	SN	ATT
PCSR	<b>0.726</b>						
BID	0.574	<b>0.827</b>					
PI	0.676	0.619	<b>0.801</b>				
PBRQ	0.649	0.522	0.643	<b>0.807</b>			
PBC	0.494	0.379	0.591	0.576	<b>0.857</b>		
SN	0.619	0.617	0.652	0.648	0.440	<b>0.766</b>	
ATT	0.580	0.489	0.619	0.508	0.447	0.561	<b>0.857</b>

Note. Square root of AVE in bold on diagonals, and Pearson correlation of constructs in off diagonals.

Model fit metrics were evaluated, corrected, and judged for the strengths and weaknesses of the CFA [82]. The evaluations of model fit exceed the respective suggested levels in previous literature, indicating that the measurement model in this study is suitable (as shown in Table 3).

**Table 3. Model Fit Criteria and Test Results**

Fit index	Recommended value	Measurement model	Structural model	Source
$\chi^2/d.f.$	$\leq 5$	1.654	1.744	Loo & Thorpe [83]
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	$\geq 0.90$	0.966	0.963	Hair et al. [84]
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	$\geq 0.90$	0.960	0.957	Hair et al. [84]
Normed Fit Index (NFI)	$\geq 0.90$	0.920	0.918	Hu & Bentler [85]
Goodness-of-Fit Indices (GFI)	$\geq 0.90$	0.906	0.899	Doll et al. [86]
Root-Mean-Squared Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	$\leq 0.08$	0.045	0.048	Henry & Stone [87]
Standardized Root Means Square Residual (SRMR)	$\leq 0.08$	0.045	0.053	Hair et al. and Hu & Bentler [84, 85]

Finally, this study used self-reported survey methods to gather data, which should be evaluated for common method bias (CMB). CMB is a concern when single potential factors are measured from the same source, especially when both citation and dependent variables are measured [88]. To address the CMB issue at the measurement level, CFA was performed by entering all measurement items into a single-factor measurement model with poor fit ( $\chi^2/d.f.=7.850$ , GFI=0.616 NFI=0.608, CFI=0.638, TLI=0.603, and RMSEA=0.146). The above diagnoses confirm that CMB is unlikely to occur in the data.

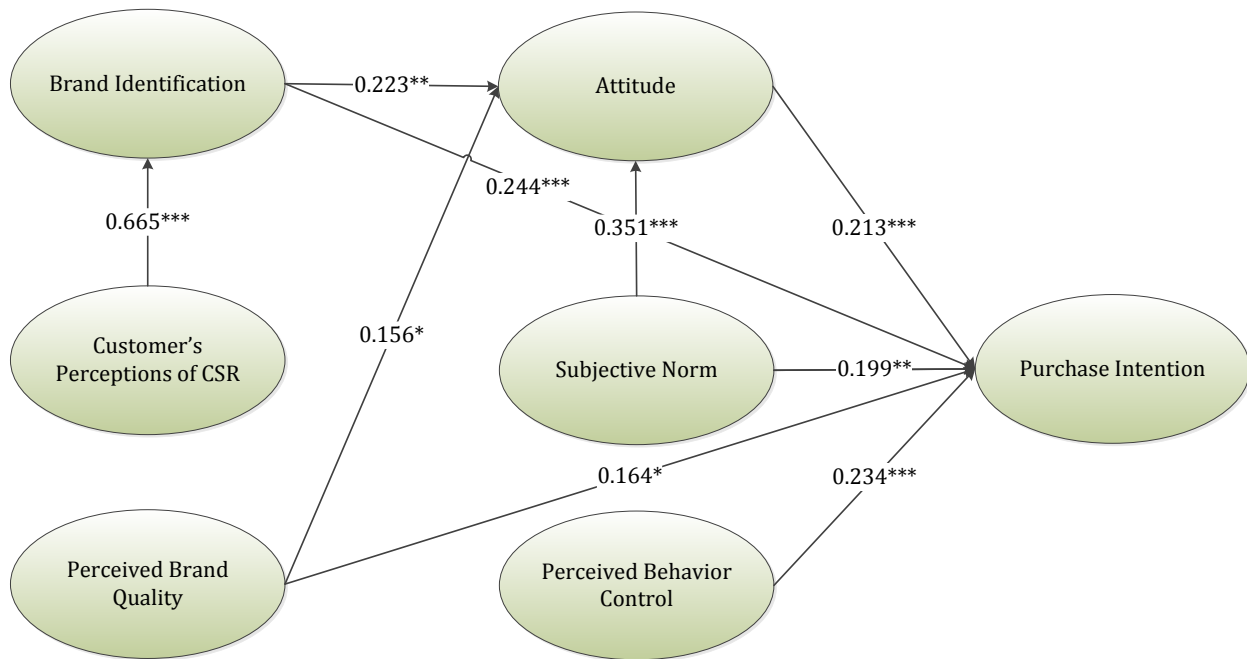
#### 4.2. Structural Model Analysis

The empirical findings are presented in Table 4 and Figure 3. First, the effects of ATT ( $\beta=0.213$ ;  $t=3.683$ ) and SN ( $\beta=0.199$ ;  $t=2.717$ ) on PI were confirmed. The impact of SN ( $\beta=0.351$ ;  $t=4.153$ ) on ATT was also confirmed. The impact of PBC ( $\beta=0.234$ ;  $t=4.081$ ) on PI was not found. Second, the influence of customers' perceptions of CSR ( $\beta=0.665$ ;  $t=8.867$ ) on BID was confirmed. Hence, H6 was supported. Third, the influence of BID on attitude ( $\beta=0.223$ ;  $t=3.218$ ) and on PI ( $\beta=0.244$ ;  $t=3.974$ ) offer support to H7 and H8. Finally, PBRQ showed a positive effect on ATT ( $\beta=0.156$ ;  $t=2.059$ ) and PI ( $\beta=0.164$ ;  $t=2.312$ ), thereby supporting H12 and H13.

**Table 4. Path coefficients and hypotheses testing**

Hypothesis	Regression weight	Standard error	z-value	Standardized path coefficient
ATT→PI	0.169	0.046	3.683	0.213***
SN→PI	0.186	0.069	2.717	0.199**
SN→ATT	0.413	0.099	4.153	0.351***
PBC→PI	0.172	0.042	4.081	0.234***
PCSR→BID	0.774	0.087	8.867	0.665***
BID→ATT	0.235	0.073	3.218	0.223**
BID→PI	0.204	0.051	3.974	0.244***
PBRQ→ATT	0.171	0.083	2.059	0.156*
PBRQ→PI	0.142	0.062	2.312	0.164*

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .



Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Figure 3. Structural model with path coefficients

This study applied a bootstrapping procedure with 5000 resamples to verify the mediation effect. As shown in Table 5, the SN had a positive mediation impact on PI through ATT ( $\beta=0.070$ ;  $t=2.593$ ), supporting H4. The findings confirmed that ATT mediates the impact of BID on PI ( $\beta=0.040$ ;  $t=2.353$ ). Hence, H9 was accepted. The mediating effects of BID ( $\beta=0.158$ ;  $t=3.383$ ) and ATT ( $\beta=0.031$ ;  $t=2.385$ ) were also found in the association of customers' perceptions of CSR on PI. Hence, H10 and H11 were accepted. Similarly, a mediating effect of ATT was also found in the association of PBRQ on PI ( $\beta=0.029$ ;  $t=1.706$ ), supporting H14.

Table 5. Analysis of the Indirect Effect

Mediation path	Point Estimate	Product of Coefficients		Bias-correct 95%		p-value	Result
		SE	Z-value	Lower	Upper		
SN→ATT→PI	0.070	0.027	2.593	0.064	0.210	0.000	Verified
BID→ATT→PI	0.040	0.017	2.353	0.019	0.112	0.001	Verified
PCSRB→BID→ATT→PI	0.031	0.013	2.385	0.11	0.065	0.001	Verified
PCSRB→BID→PI	0.158	0.047	3.383	0.078	0.262	0.000	Verified
PBRQ→ATT→PI	0.029	0.017	1.706	0.002	0.072	0.038	Verified

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research explores the association between frequent soccer enthusiasts and the PI of sports sponsorship brands grounded in TPB, the social identity model, and brand equity theory. The findings suggest that consumers' PI is influenced by both ATT and SN, as well as by customers' perceptions of CSR, BID, and PBRQ. These empirical results offer theoretical references and practical insights for sports brand marketing.

### 5.1. Research Findings and Contributions

The present study employed TPB as one of the theoretical frameworks to measure consumers' behavioral intentions. This study used ATT, SN, and PBC as factors to measure the impact of TPB on PI and found significant effects of these factors on PI. Additionally, the study used these three TPB elements as mediating variables for antecedents, with purchasing intention as the outcome. The findings related to TPB in this study can be compared to those in the research by Tiwari et al. [13]. Tiwari et al. [13] aimed to explore the effect of fashion influencer attributes on consumers' PIs, focusing on how ATT mediated these relationships and providing insights into influencer marketing within the fashion industry. Tiwari et al. [13] utilized a conceptual framework that extended TPB by incorporating perceived trust (PT). Data for Tiwari et al.'s [13] research were gathered from respondents nationwide and analyzed through path analysis and mediation methods. Their findings indicated that PT, SN, and PBC positively impacted ATT toward fashion



influencers; however, PBC did not exhibit a direct relationship with PIs in the proposed model. They also found that ATT was significantly associated with PIs, both directly and indirectly, highlighting the significance of influencer marketing, particularly for fashion products.

The present study confirms the effects of the three TPB determinants - ATT, SN, and PBC - on PI, contributing to TPB-related literature for sports sponsorship brands. This research found that both ATT and SN significantly impacted PI, consistent with previous studies [51, 89, 90]. In sports brand consumption, Stokburger-Sauer et al. [91] showed that consumers' ATT toward brand sponsors influences their PI, and Leonnard et al. [92] found that SN significantly impacted sportswear PI among young Indonesian Muslim women. This study also found that ATT mediated the relationship between SN and PI, consistent with the positive interaction effect between SN and ATT on consumers' brand-related e-WOM referral intentions [93]. As soccer is a group sport, enthusiasts are often engaged in games or competitions, which makes them more susceptible to peer influence. The findings also showed a significant effect between PBC and PI, consistent with prior findings [58, 94]. This suggests that, as a global brand, Kelme's sponsorship of different soccer matches in China could better support its marketing efforts, particularly for grassroots soccer.

Secondly, the present research aimed to explore the impact of PCSR on PI, via different mediating variables. The study found that PCSR was indirectly associated with PI via ATT and BID. The findings of this study are somewhat comparable to a study by Tao et al. [16]. The research of Tao et al. [16] specifically targets customers within Taiwan's green building sector, proposing a framework grounded in Carroll's CSR model, the TPB, and Cognitive Consistency Theory (CCT). The goal is to evaluate CSR's impact on sustainable PI (SPI). Additionally, the research examines how CSR influences sustainable word of mouth (SWOM), sustainable attitude (SA), sustainable concern (SC), and sustainable trust (ST). The study further explores the effects of SA, SC, SWOM, and ST on SPI and investigates the mediating roles of SA, SC, and SWOM in the association between CSR and SPI. Data for Tao et al.'s [16] research was gathered from customers in Taiwan's sustainable building sector using convenience sampling. Tao et al.'s [16] findings indicated that CSR positively impacted SPI, SWOM, SA, SC, and ST. In particular, SWOM showed a strong influence on SPI, while SC and ST were also significantly linked to SPI. All hypothesized relationships were found to be significant, except for the link between SA and SPI. Moreover, the association between CSR and SPI was fully mediated by ST, SWOM, and SC, while SA did not significantly mediate this relationship.

This study also examined how consumers' CSR perceptions impact their PIs through BID, finding that CSR perceptions significantly influenced BID, consistent with prior findings [63]. Specifically, CSR perception affects consumers' identification with the company's brand. BID was also found to significantly impact ATT, consistent with research suggesting that community identity positively influences ATT [68, 95]. BID significantly impacted PI, consistent with previous studies [69, 96]. Kleine et al. [97] showed that individuals are likely to consume products that promote identities important to them. In sports branding, Carlson et al. [98] suggested that cognitive identification with sports team brands influences retail consumption, while Kim & James [99] found that purchasing team-licensed merchandise is a key part of sports fan identity, aligning with the present study. Additionally, ATT partially mediated the BID-PI relationship, and both BID and ATT mediated the association between CSR perception and PI, showing that CSR perception enhances brand identification, thereby influencing ATT and PI.

Finally, this study incorporated PBRQ into TPB to investigate PBRQ's influence on PI through ATT. Prior literature suggests that PBRQ is crucial for global brands, as perceived quality increases product preference and motivates consumers to choose the brand over competitors [100]. This study found that PBRQ significantly impacted ATT, aligning with previous research [41, 73, 74]. PBRQ also significantly impacted PI, consistent with earlier studies [101]. Due to declines in the product, ATT, and issues [102], consistent with findings showing that brand quality affects attitude in luxury hotel brands and that attitude partially mediates the impact of brand quality on PI [103].

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

This research advances the theoretical frameworks of the TPB, BID theory, PBRQ, and CSR by refining and extending their application to sports sponsorship brands. By applying TPB to this new domain, the study demonstrates the robustness of the theory in predicting consumer PIs beyond its traditional contexts [10]. The findings highlight the effectiveness of TPB constructs—ATT, SN, and PBC—in explaining PIs for sports-sponsored products, thereby enhancing the generalizability of TPB to underexplored areas [11, 104]. Additionally, the research contributes to BID theory by revealing the mediating role of BID between SN and PIs [34]. This provides valuable insights into how social influences drive consumer loyalty and brand alignment, particularly within sports sponsorship markets.

The inclusion of PBRQ adds a critical dimension to consumer behavior theory by showing that perceptions of brand quality significantly influence ATT and intentions, which is particularly important in the competitive landscape of sports sponsorship [27]. Furthermore, the study integrates PCSR into TPB by demonstrating its indirect effect on PIs through BID, suggesting that CSR initiatives can enhance consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior when aligned with BID [105-107]. Overall, these theoretical advancements enhance the explanatory power of these frameworks and offer a more integrated consideration of customer conduct within the context of sports sponsorship.

### 5.3. Practical Implications

Firstly, the research results indicate that attitude and SN are more effective predictors of consumers' PI. Brand managers should consider the influence of key customers when developing brand positioning and strategy, as these individuals can disseminate information about the brand. Long-term sponsorship of branded products at various levels of soccer matches can help cultivate key customers, particularly grassroots soccer organizers and team captains.

An important practical implication derived from this study is the recommendation for companies to implement a hybrid sponsorship approach that balances the advantages of both grassroots and high-profile soccer sponsorships [108]. Grassroots sponsorships allow businesses to cultivate deep, long-lasting relationships with local communities, enhancing loyalty and creating an authentic brand presence [109]. In contrast, high-profile sponsorships provide greater visibility and brand prestige at a broader level. By strategically allocating resources to both sponsorship types, companies can achieve the dual objectives of wide brand recognition and meaningful community engagement, thereby optimizing the overall impact of their sponsorship initiatives.

Influenced by the collectivist culture, soccer consumers tend to agree with the spending decisions of soccer team organizers or captains when participating in soccer matches and buy the same brand of products uniformly. This research provides several practical insights for sports sponsorship brands in collectivist cultures [110]. Companies can implement strategies that emphasize group dynamics, such as creating team-specific offers or tailoring products to match the collective identity of sports groups. By focusing on influential members, like team leaders, brands can influence purchasing behavior across the entire group [111]. Furthermore, grassroots sponsorships combined with social media efforts that encourage team engagement can significantly increase brand loyalty. Recognizing the role of group solidarity in collectivist societies enables brands to create more effective marketing approaches that foster loyalty and increase sales.

Additionally, this research demonstrates that consumers' perceptions of a brand's CSR significantly impact their brand identity, and in turn, their ATT and PIs. Brand companies should continually enhance their social responsibility initiatives and consider the shared values between these health initiatives and their target consumers. Brand managers need to gain insights into the healthy lifestyles and preferences of their target customers to showcase relevant identity elements. They should explore ways to align target market values with brand values, develop brand communities through sponsorship of soccer match experiences, and enhance brand appeal to achieve sustained PI [112, 113].

Within the scope of this research, CSR efforts were evaluated based on consumers' perceptions of a brand's ethical conduct, environmental stewardship, and community engagement [114]. The findings indicate that CSR initiatives significantly impact brand identity BID, especially when companies prioritize sustainability and actively participate in local community efforts. From a practical perspective, companies and brand managers can leverage CSR as a key strategy to strengthen consumer identification and build loyalty. Focusing on visible and meaningful CSR initiatives - such as environmental projects or community outreach programs can forge deeper emotional connections with consumers [106]. This approach not only fosters brand loyalty but also differentiates the brand in competitive industries where socially responsible practices are increasingly valued.

Finally, this study incorporates PBRQ into TPB, and the results confirm that PBRQ can be integrated into ATT for subsequent evaluation and purchase behavior. The mediating effects of ATT between consumers' PBRQ and PI can help managers understand the part of brand equity in the customer evaluation and managerial procedure. Soccer enthusiasts are more rational in their sports brand consumption, and PBRQ is an important factor among many similar brand products. In the interviews, the respondents think that most of Kelme's products are of better quality and have a higher price/performance ratio, but products such as down jackets are of average quality and have a higher price compared to similar branded products. This study suggests exploring how brands can strengthen their CSR image and influence PI through participation in health-related activities, leveraging the framework of brand asset theory.

### 5.4. Research Limitations and Recommendations

This study collected data from a sample of soccer enthusiasts who regularly participate in the sport and purchase products from sports sponsorship brands, resulting in findings that are relatively representative of China. However, since the sample was drawn from Taiyuan, the results do not necessarily reflect the experiences and needs of users from other domestic or foreign regions within the same field. To enhance the generalizability of the outcomes, the theoretical validity of this research should be verified on a larger scale in future studies. In the follow-up study, brand preferences for soccer in various regions of China and abroad will be compared to explore the consumption characteristics of consumers across different countries, cultures, and sports brands, ultimately providing marketing strategies for segmenting the sports market.

## 6. Declarations

### 6.1. Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Z.G. and J.G.; methodology, Z.G. and S.C.; validation, J.G.; formal analysis, Z.G. and J.G.; investigation, Z.G. and J.G.; writing—original draft preparation, Z.G., J.G., and S.C.; writing—review and editing, Z.G., J.G., and S.C.; visualization, Z.G. and S.C.; supervision, J.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

### 6.2. Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available in the article.

### 6.3. Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### 6.4. Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

### 6.5. Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

### 6.6. Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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## Appendix I: Questionnaire

Constructs	Items	References
Attitude (ATT)	ATT1: I find the prospect of purchasing Kelme brand products to be appealing. ATT2: I view the act of buying Kelme brand products as pleasurable. ATT3: I consider the experience of purchasing Kelme brand products to be enjoyable. ATT4: I believe that acquiring Kelme brand products is advantageous for me.	Ajzen [12]
Subjective Norm (SN)	SN1: Most individuals who are important to me have purchased Kelme brand products. SN2: People whom I respect have acquired Kelme brand products. SN3: My soccer-playing peers show a preference for Kelme brand products. SN4: My acquaintances who play soccer often recommend Kelme brand products to me.	Ajzen [12]
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	PBC1: I possess the financial means to purchase Kelme brand products. PBC2: I have the time and energy needed to acquire Kelme brand products. PBC3: Purchasing Kelme brand products is a straightforward process for me.	Ajzen [12]
Perceived Brand Quality (PBRQ)	PBRQ1: I perceive Kelme brand products to be of high quality. PBRQ2: My choice of this product is based on its reputation for quality. PBRQ3: This product offers me valuable insights into the quality standards in the market.	Sweeney & Soutar and Zhou et al. [74, 76]
Purchase Intention (PI)	PI1: I have a strong desire to purchase Kelme brand products. PI2: The likelihood of my purchasing Kelme brand products is very high. PI3: When presented with products of equivalent functionality, I would prioritize purchasing Kelme brand products. PI4: I am inclined to purchase Kelme brand products alongside my peers.	Ajzen [12]
Perceived Corporate Social Responsibility (PCSR)	PCSR1: The Kelme brand demonstrates social responsibility. PCSR2: The Kelme brand has made significant contributions to charitable causes. PCSR3: The Kelme brand adopts a responsible attitude approach to environmental issues.	Hur et al. [63]
Brand Identity (BID)	BID1: I identify with the design philosophy behind the Kelme brand logo. BID2: I resonate with the slogans associated with the Kelme brand (e.g., "Never Give Up" and "Leave Your Mark"). BID3: I share many commonalities with other individuals who purchase products from this brand.	Tuškej et al. [33]