

Relationship Between Awareness of Social Contribution and Playing Opportunities Among Female Professional Soccer Players

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This study examined whether awareness of social contribution among female professional soccer players differs depending on opportunities to participate in matches. Survey results showed that the substitute player group scored higher than the starter group in awareness of social contribution in the first season (N = 122), while there was no difference between the two groups in the second season (N = 114). Although there was no association between environmental change and awareness of social contribution among the substitute players in the first season, the association was positive in the second season, regardless of playing opportunities. Evaluation of the social contribution activities was as follows: while the first season of the league's launch consisted of many events held independently by clubs, such as soccer classes and cleanup activities, the second season consisted of many events held in cooperation with various organizations. These results suggest that fostering awareness of social contribution among players requires ensuring opportunities for interaction among players across different clubs as well as encouraging active players to engage in social contribution activities to address social issues in collaboration with external organizations.

Keywords: female professional soccer players, social contribution activities, awareness of social contribution, playing opportunities

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1. Introduction

1.1. Challenges to Top Athlete Engagement in Social Contribution Activities

While the priority of competitive athletes in maintaining top levels of performance is a regimen involving training and practice with care given to ensure sufficient time for recovery to optimize results, team members are now also encouraged to become involved in forming communities rooted in individual regions and engage in solving social issues (MEXT, 2012; Mano, 2012; Shilbury et al., 2008). The importance of athlete involvement in social contribution activities involving the promotion of sports and the improvement of physical fitness among local residents is also emphasized by the articles of

incorporation of sports organizations (Sugiura, 2006, p. 153; Japan Association of Athletics Federations, 2025; Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League, 2023a). In the past, top athletes were expected to devote themselves solely to improving their skills and competitiveness just as individuals training in any occupation are expected to devote themselves to mastering their chosen field (Sugiura, 2006, p. 151). It has been pointed out, however, that expecting individual athletes to devote themselves solely to sports from childhood or adolescence with the goal of achieving superior results increases the risk of suppressing interest and participation in society, developing a distorted view of the meaning of sports, and preventing the growth of a diverse sense of value (Kataoka, 2021; Yamamoto, 2022).

It is known that the life skills important for

focusing on social phenomena differ depending on the athletes' competition level (Nozawa & Otani, 2019; Yamamoto & Shimamoto, 2019). Tokairin et al. (2024) reported that highly competitive athletes playing on Japanese national teams have limited contact with individuals in society other than their coaches and staff during training during their developmental years, while the potential exists that athletes who are not at the competition level, and therefore have more free time because of their lighter training schedules, have greater contact with society through the volunteer and academic activities recommended by their coaches. While communication is an important life skill developed through sports (Cronin & Allen, 2017; Shimamoto et al., 2013), it is also known to be associated with an athlete's empathy and competitive performance (Bedir et al., 2023). In addition, it is thought that the life skills developed in sports situations can be transferred to non-sporting situations such as in the community and social environment (Mossman et al., 2021; Yabunaka et al., 2022). Based on the foregoing, it may be speculated that the awareness of social contribution will differ depending on the competition level.

Social contribution activities¹ do not lead directly to the improvement of competition level, and such activities may sometimes be thought to interfere with competitive activities. When top athletes in team sports engage in social contribution activities, they need to make up for lost recovery time when they are not training or playing in matches under the schedule set by the club. Rest is indispensable for recovery from fatigue and improving performance. With this in mind, it is a challenge from the perspective of time and state-of-mind for top athletes to engage in social contribution activities; and athletes often face a dilemma in balancing competitive activities and social contribution activities (Tokairin, 2022).

1.2. Social Contribution Activities by Soccer Players

The Japan Professional Football League (J. League) is active in "Sharen!" as a social contribution activity in collaboration with community residents, companies, local governments, schools, and so on. to address such social issues as education, diversity, community development, and health (Koyoshi, 2023). These activities are important in helping professional soccer players to develop an awareness of activities

and participation in solving social issues. However, many social contribution activities are planned and managed by club staff. In addition, social contribution activities are often attended by retired professional soccer players, while currently active professional soccer players rarely participate².

Launched in 2021, the Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League (WE League) is also focusing on social contribution activities. One of the characteristics of their social contribution activities, which is called WE ACTION, is that many stakeholders, including the players, leagues, clubs, sponsors, and media, are loosely associated (Oi, 2022), and that all currently active professional female soccer players participate (Sasaki et al., 2021). WE ACTION can be classified into two categories: activities in which WE League staff design and lead various programs based on the program's philosophy, and activities carried out independently by clubs, led by the members of each club's Philosophy Promotion Committee (Shoji, 2022, p. 15). The former has implemented programs such as credo creation and WE Leaguer training that includes all clubs, and holds events on the themes of career and gender as "WE ACTION DAY" or "ALL WE ACTION DAY" (Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League, 2023b, p. 7). These events take place mainly during the off-season under the leadership of the WE League, while the latter is a social contribution activity that each club plans and manages independently during the season. The members of each club's Philosophy Promotion Committee participate in monthly meetings of the WE League Philosophy Promotion Committee, report on their club's social contribution activities, and monitor the social contribution activities of other clubs (Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League, 2022). In addition, the members of each club's Philosophy Promotion Committee report and discuss the agenda of the meeting with their club's athletes (Shoji, 2022, pp. 58–62). In this way, athletes in the WE League not only participate in social contribution activities, but also participate in many processes, from planning to participation.

1.3. The Social Situation of Professional Soccer Players

Professional soccer players may not only face the dilemma of balancing social contribution activities

and competitive activities, but also the social aspect of social contribution activities. It has been pointed out, for example, that club-led social contribution activities tend to reflect the intentions of sponsors rather than the intentions of the players (Shin, 2022, pp. 125–131). In addition, although they are classified as professional soccer players, there are athletes whose contracts allow them to focus solely on athletic activities, such as weight training and other physical conditioning; and there are athletes whose contracts require them to balance their competitive activities with work for the sponsor. All professional soccer players, regardless of whether or not they are engaged in general work for the sponsor, train and play competitively with the same goal in mind. Therefore, it is generally accepted that social contribution activities that are not directly related to improving competition level have an emotional component depending on the position and situation in which each person is placed (Shin, 2022, pp. 143–155). In addition, it is known that social contribution activities led by professional sports clubs are influenced by the characteristics of the owners (Babiak & Yang, 2022) and the financial situation of the club (Barbero-Inchaurre et al., 2025). However, the awareness of social contribution among athletes, who are the main actors in social contribution activities, and how they approach the social contribution activities planned and conducted by their clubs, remains unclear. A survey to clarify these points would provide important basic knowledge related to the evaluation of league-led measures to contribute to society by taking into account the situation of professional soccer players (e.g., opportunities to participate in matches, content of social contribution activities, and changes in the environment due to the establishment of the WE League).

1.4. Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate whether the awareness of social contribution among female professional soccer players differs depending on the opportunity to participate in matches. Therefore, this study explored similarities and differences in the social contribution awareness between starters and substitutes. If we assume that the opportunity to participate in matches reflects competition level, it is expected that the awareness of social contribution will vary depending

on the opportunity to participate in matches.

The social situation of players in the WE League can be inferred from changes in the environment due to the establishment of the WE League (environmental change), the level of conceptual understanding of the WE League philosophy (conceptual understanding), awareness of contribution in an inclusive society (awareness of social contribution), and the actual status of social contribution activities. Therefore, we included an investigation of survey items related to environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution as well as the status of implementation of social contribution activities during the season in which the survey was conducted. We also examined whether environmental change and conceptual understanding differ depending on the opportunity to participate in matches, and whether awareness of social contribution is related to environmental change and conceptual understanding. In addition, the status of implementation of social contribution activities was evaluated by the classification of content and frequency of implementation.

2. Study 1: Survey of Player Awareness of Social Contribution Activities During the 2021–2022 Season

2.1. Methods

2.1.1. Participants

As of August 2022, 307 professional soccer players were members of clubs affiliated with the WE League for the 2021–2022 season. As a result of screening based on the criteria of consent to participate in the survey, response to all survey items, and participation in social contribution activities throughout the year, the number of valid responses was 137 (valid response rate: 44.6%).

2.1.2. Survey Items

In the face sheet, we asked for team affiliation, age, number of years of competition, experience representing Japan on national teams, and the opportunity to participate in matches. Teams were selected from all 11 clubs in the WE League in the 2021–2022 season. Based on identifiability, the age distribution of the population, and the age range of adolescents, one of six options was selected: 18 years or younger, 19 to 22 years, 23 to 26 years, 27 to 30

years, 31 to 34 years, or 35 years or older. As for number of years of competition, participants were asked to provide integer values. As for experience representing Japan on national teams, regardless of age, participants were asked whether they had experience representing Japan. In response to "Please select the one that you think best applies to last year's performance (2021–2022 season)," participants selected from three options: "I was mainly a starter," "I was a substitute," and "I didn't have a chance to play due to injury or other reasons." In terms of opportunities to participate in matches, those who selected "I was mainly a starter" in the item on the face sheet were classified as the starter group, those who selected "I was a substitute" were classified as the substitute group, and those who selected "I did not have a chance to play due to injury or other factors" were classified as the injured group.

The survey was set up with three concepts based on the WE League philosophy and the specific initiatives of social contribution activities. 1) Environmental Change: In response to eight items regarding the perception that the environment surrounding soccer players had changed due to the launch of the WE League, the following was asked, "In the current (2021–2022) season of the WE League, how would you rate your response to the following items?" The response to each item was based on a four-point scale from 1 (*I didn't feel this at all*) to 4 (*I felt this very much*). 2) Conceptual Understanding: Seven items were posed regarding understanding of WE League social contribution activities. 3) Awareness of Social Contribution: Seven items were posed regarding awareness of contribution in an inclusive society. In response to items regarding Conceptual Understanding and Awareness of Social Contribution, the following was asked, "How interested are you in the following items?" The response to each item was based on a four-point scale from 1 (*I am not interested at all*) to 4 (*I am very interested*).

These items were reviewed and revised in three face-to-face meetings, three online meetings, and 12 e-mail exchanges, by two university faculty members specializing in sports psychology, one graduate student, and two staff members belonging to the department related to the promotion of the WE League philosophy.

2.1.3. Procedures

The survey was distributed using Google

Forms by e-mail from the WE League to survey respondents through each club between August 15 and September 21, 2022. Survey participation was voluntary and consent was obtained after participants were informed of the purpose of the research, the absence of disadvantage due to non-participation in the survey, anonymity of the survey, and the method of publication of the results. The relevant person at the club to which respondents belonged received the same explanation via a web conferencing system (Zoom) and agreed to cooperation with the survey. This study was approved by the SFC Research Ethics Committee of Keio University.

Specific social contribution activities engaged in by the WE League and league clubs were obtained comprehensively from the websites of the WE League and the individual league clubs.

2.1.4. Analyses

Four analyses were conducted. First, the personal attributes collected on the face sheet were tabulated. Second, to examine the effects of opportunity to participate in matches on environmental changes, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution, we performed an unpaired *t*-test (two-sided test) with the opportunity to participate (starter group and substitute group) as the independent variable and the total score of each concept (environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution) as the dependent variable. Significance level was set at 5%. In addition, as an exploratory analysis, we performed an unpaired *t*-test with participation opportunities as the independent variable and the score of each item as the dependent variable (**Table 1**). Third, to examine the relationship between environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution, we performed a correlation analysis (test of no correlation) using the mean score of each variable within each individual. Considering the characteristics of a multiple test, we performed Bonferroni correction for significance level before examining the results (when the significance level was $\alpha = .05$, the level was changed to $.05/3 \doteq .0167$). Fourth, the social contribution activities of each club were classified with reference to the categories established by Ogiso et al. (2021), and the number and percentage of activities were calculated. The classifications were (A) provision of goods, (B) improvement of the sports environment, (C)

financial support and donations, (D) visit, exchange, and volunteer activities, (E) invitations to matches, (F) holding and participating in events, (G) sports coaching, (H) lectures, (I) awareness-raising activities, and (J) other. Statistical processing was performed using IBM's SPSS Statistics 28.0 and Microsoft's Excel.

2.2. Results

2.2.1. Personal Attributes

Responses were received from at least one person from each of the 11 clubs in the WE League in the 2021–2022 season. Respondents were 63 from the starter group, 59 from the substitute group, and 15 from the injured group. In the subsequent analysis, the data of the injured group were excluded. Valid respondents were 6 aged 18 or younger, 27 aged 19–22, 54 aged 23–26, 22 aged 27–30, 10 aged 31–34, and 3 aged 35 or older. The mean number of years of competition was 17.91 years ($SD = 4.42$). There were 40 players with and 82 without Japan national team experience.

2.2.2. Influence of Opportunity to Participate in Matches on Environmental Change, Conceptual Understanding, and Awareness of Social Contribution

Table 1 shows the scores of environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution (total score for each concept and score for each item) for the starter group and the substitute group. *T*-test revealed no significant difference between the starter group and the substitute group in terms of the total score of the environmental change ($t(120) = 1.37, p = .174, d = 0.25$). Similarly, *t*-test for the total score of conceptual understanding revealed no significant difference between the starter group and the substitute group ($t(120) = 1.96, p = .052, d = 0.36$). *t*-test for the total score of awareness of social contribution showed that the substitute group ($M \pm SD = 23.53 \pm 2.58$) was significantly higher than the starter group ($M \pm SD = 21.95 \pm 3.21$) ($t(120) = 2.97, p = .004, d = 0.54$).

2.2.3. Relationship Between Conceptual Understanding and Environmental Change and Awareness of Social Contribution

Table 2 shows the correlation between variables

in environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution. The correlation coefficient between environmental change and conceptual understanding was significant for both the starter group and the substitute group ($r = .488, p < .001$; $r = .673, p < .001$, respectively). The correlation coefficient between environmental change and awareness of social contribution was significant in the starter group ($r = .327, p = .009$), but not in the substitute group ($r = .309, p = .017$). The correlation coefficient between conceptual understanding and awareness of social contribution was significant in both groups ($r = .667, p < .001$; $r = .368, p = .004$, respectively).

2.2.4. Types and Number of Social Contribution Activities Implemented

A total of 60 social contribution activities were conducted by league member clubs, including 24 (40.7%) for category D (visits, exchanges, and volunteer activities), 16 (27.1%) for category F (holding and participating in events), 11 (18.6%) for category G (sports coaching), 6 (10.2%) for category H (lectures), 1 (1.9%) for category A (provision of goods), and 1 (1.9%) for category I (awareness-raising activities). There were no activities related to category B (improvement of the sports environment), category C (financial support and donations), or category E (invitations to matches); and the social contribution activities of category D, which were the most frequent, were mainly activities for multiple people to participate in cleanup activities in the area around the club and interact with supporters. Social contribution activities in category F, which were the next most frequently implemented, were not only in cooperation with their own clubs, but also with various sports organizations, governments, and NPOs.

2.3. Interim Summary

As a result of Study 1, the substitute group had a higher awareness of social contribution than the starter group did. In addition, there was a positive correlation between environmental change and awareness of social contribution among the starter group, but not among the substitute group. There was a positive correlation between environmental change and conceptual understanding, and between the conceptual understanding and the awareness of social contribution, regardless of the opportunity to

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and *t*-test results in Studies 1 and 2

Items		2021–2022 Season				2022–2023 Season					
		Starter		Substitute		<i>t</i> -value	Starter		Substitute		<i>t</i> -value
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Environmental Change											
1	Interested in the number of spectators of other clubs	3.06	0.72	3.20	0.71	1.08	2.66	0.75	2.72	0.68	0.43
2	Interested in the number of spectators of their own clubs	—	—	—	—	—	2.80	0.95	2.88	0.70	0.47
3	Frequency of media coverage	2.46	1.03	2.49	0.95	0.18	2.20	0.78	2.14	0.66	0.43
4	High profile from supporters/fans	2.54	0.86	2.76	0.80	1.49	2.58	0.67	2.47	0.64	0.89
5	Support and back-up from the League	2.63	0.89	2.86	0.80	1.51	2.34	0.80	2.38	0.72	0.24
6	Support and back-up from clubs	—	—	—	—	—	2.52	0.81	2.59	0.71	0.51
7	Generous sponsor support	3.14	0.80	3.32	0.80	1.24	3.00	0.88	3.06	0.79	0.39
8	High awareness of social contribution by players of other clubs	3.10	0.76	2.88	0.72	1.60	2.72	0.73	2.73	0.57	0.11
9	High awareness of social contribution by players of their own clubs	—	—	—	—	—	2.76	0.72	2.84	0.70	0.63
10	Seriousness of winning and losing throughout the League	3.57	0.71	3.68	0.54	0.94	3.06	0.89	3.23	0.71	1.13
11	High level of soccer skills throughout the League	2.84	0.79	3.17	0.67	2.48*	3.00	0.70	3.09	0.64	0.74
Total		23.35	4.48	24.37	3.70	1.37	29.64	5.46	30.14	4.21	0.56
Conceptual Understanding											
1	Credo creation	2.63	0.73	2.78	0.59	1.21	—	—	—	—	—
2	Technical seminars	2.54	0.71	2.81	0.57	2.34*	—	—	—	—	—
3	WE leaguer training	2.71	0.66	3.00	0.70	2.33	2.50	0.95	2.72	0.77	1.32
4	WE meeting with chair	2.65	0.68	2.90	0.61	2.13*	2.38	0.86	2.45	0.67	0.50
5	Team meetings	3.10	0.69	3.08	0.82	0.08	2.60	0.83	2.58	0.71	0.15
6	WE ACTION MEETING	2.84	0.70	3.08	0.65	1.99	2.90	1.07	2.88	0.86	0.13
7	Club's own philosophy promotion activities	3.16	0.68	3.15	0.61	0.05	2.54	0.76	2.73	0.70	1.40*
Total		19.63	3.45	20.81	3.16	1.96	12.92	3.42	13.36	2.75	0.76
Awareness of Social Contribution											
1	Interested in sports for the disabled and support for the disabled	3.35	0.77	3.46	0.63	0.86	2.90	0.84	2.86	0.79	0.26
2	Interested in environmental issues	3.00	0.67	3.22	0.56	1.97	2.78	0.79	2.73	0.72	0.32
3	Interested in contributing to the community and society	3.33	0.62	3.49	0.54	1.51	3.02	0.69	3.06	0.59	0.35
4	I want to contribute to the spread and development of women's soccer in Japan	3.46	0.62	3.59	0.53	1.28	3.32	0.79	3.28	0.60	0.29
5	Interested in poverty issues	2.76	0.86	3.12	0.67	2.57*	2.84	0.82	2.72	0.72	0.83
6	Interested in gender equality and a diverse society	3.06	0.69	3.27	0.72	1.63	—	—	—	—	—
7	Gender equality	—	—	—	—	—	2.78	0.76	2.92	0.74	1.00
8	Diverse society	—	—	—	—	—	2.80	0.78	2.97	0.67	1.22
9	It gives me a chance to think about my career	2.98	0.81	3.37	0.58	3.05*	—	—	—	—	—
10	Support for children	—	—	—	—	—	3.14	0.76	3.14	0.77	0.00
11	Support for the elderly	—	—	—	—	—	2.64	0.80	2.64	0.68	0.00
Total		21.95	3.21	23.53	2.58	2.97*	26.22	5.46	26.33	4.47	0.12

Note. * $p < .05$

participate in matches.

Since the 2021–2022 season was the first season of the WE League, there were programs in which the players took the lead in devising social contribution activities with all players participating (Nojima Stella

Kanagawa Sagamihara, 2021), while some clubs conducted cleanup activities (INAC Kobe Leonessa, 2021) as they had done previously and some clubs conducted social contribution activities mainly at their soccer schools (Urawa Reds Ladies, 2021). For

Table 2 Correlation matrix between variables in the 2021–2022 season

	Environmental Change	Conceptual Understanding	Awareness of Social Contribution
Environmental Change	—	.488 *	.327 *
Conceptual Understanding	.673 *	—	.667 *
Awareness of Social Contribution	.309	.368 *	—

Notes. Asterisks indicate $p < .0167$ (Bonferroni-corrected).
The off-diagonal elements indicate the results for the starting member in the upper triangle and for the substitute member in the lower triangle.

this reason, there may have been differences in the content of social contribution activities among clubs, and it is possible that they were engaging in trial-and-error in exploring social contribution activities (Shoji, 2022, pp. 60–62). In addition, due to the change in the environment with the launch of the WE League, the players may have struggled to balance their competitive activities with their social contribution activities. Therefore, it is not clear how probative the data from the first season of the WE League is. Consequently, Study 2 involved a similar follow-up survey in the 2022–2023 season, the second season of the league.

3. Study 2: Survey of Player Awareness of Social Contribution Activities in the 2022–2023 Season

3.1. Methods

3.1.1. Participants

Potential participants of this study were 237 players belonging to league member clubs in the 2022–2023 season of the WE League as of August 2023. The number of valid responses, screened based on the same criteria as Study 1, was 126 (valid response rate: 53.2%). Since this survey was conducted anonymously, it was not clear to what extent respondents overlapped with those of Study 1.

3.1.2. Survey Items

The face sheet was the same as in Study 1. The survey was set up in the same way as Study 1, with the exception of the points described later.

Expressions in the four items regarding environmental change were reviewed. The category “Interested in the results and the number of spectators of other clubs” was divided into two categories: “Interested in the number of spectators of other

clubs” and “Interested in the number of spectators of their own club.” The items “High awareness of social contribution by other players and clubs” was divided into two categories: “High awareness of social contribution by players of their own club” and “High awareness of social contribution by players of other clubs.” “Seriousness of winning and losing” was changed to “Seriousness of winning and losing throughout the League,” and the item “High level of soccer skills” was changed to “High level of soccer skills throughout the League.” As a result of these changes, the environmental change was set in 11 items. Five items were set for conceptual understanding, excluding two items that were not implemented in the 2022–2023 season (technical seminars and credo creation). The expression and content of awareness of social contribution were reviewed. “Interested in gender equality and a diverse society” was divided into two items, “Gender equality” and “Diverse society;” and two items were added, “Support for children” and “Support for the elderly,” based on the inclusion of a number of welfare-related initiatives in the social contribution activities of the 2021–2022 season. “It gives me a chance to think about my career” was excluded from Study 2 because it was judged to be unrelated to the awareness of social contribution. From the above, nine items were set for awareness of social contribution. These items were reviewed and revised through three face-to-face meetings, three online meetings, and 15 e-mail exchanges.

3.1.3. Procedures

The procedure was the same as that applied in Study 1, except for the survey period. The survey period for Study 2 was from August 15 to September 21, 2023.

3.1.4. Analyses

Analyses were the same as for Study 1.

3.2 Results

3.2.1. Personal Attributes

Responses were received from at least one person from each of the 11 member clubs of the WE League in the 2022–2023 season. Respondents were 50 from the starter group, 64 from the substitute group, and 12 from the injured group. In the subsequent analysis, the data of the injured group were excluded. The age range of valid respondents was 4 aged 18 or younger, 39 aged 19–22, 40 aged 23–26, 19 aged 27–30, 7 aged 31–34, and 5 aged 35 or older. The mean number of years of competition was 17.47 years ($SD = 5.16$). There were 28 players with and 86 without Japan national team experience.

3.2.2. Influence of Opportunity to Participate in Matches on Environment Change, Conceptual Understanding, and Awareness of Social Contribution

Table 1 shows the total scores of each concept and the scores of each item for the starter group and the substitute group. *T*-test revealed no significant difference between conditions when the total score of any concept was the dependent variable ($t(112) = 0.55, p = .581, d = 0.10$; $t(112) = 0.76, p = .448, d = 0.02$; $t(112) = 0.12, p = .908, d = 0.14$, respectively).

3.2.3. Relationship Between Conceptual Understanding and Environmental Change, and Awareness of Social Contribution

Table 3 shows the correlation between variables in environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution. Analysis revealed a significant correlation between environmental change and conceptual understanding for both the starter

group and the substitute group ($r = .592, p < .001$; $r = .457, p < .001$, respectively). Significant correlation was apparent in both groups between environmental change and awareness of social contribution ($r = .622, p < .001$; $r = .432, p < .001$). Significant correlation was also seen in both groups between conceptual understanding and the awareness of social contribution ($r = .443, p < .001$; $r = .386, p = .002$).

3.2.4. Types and Number of Social Contribution Activities Implemented

A total of 46 social contribution activities were conducted, including 26 (56.5%) in category F (holding and participating events), 9 (19.6%) in category D (visit, exchange, and volunteer activities), 9 (19.6%) in category G (sports coaching), 1 (2.2%) in E (invitations to matches), and 1 (2.2%) in category I (awareness-raising activity). There were no activities related to category A (provision of goods), category B (improvement of the sports environment), category C (financial support and donations), and category H (lectures). Many of the social contribution activities in category F, were conducted most frequently, were conducted in cooperation with various sports organizations, governments, and NPOs; and many of the players participated in these activities from start to finish.

3.3. Interim Summary

Study 2 showed no significant difference in the 2022–2023 season between the starter group and the substitute group for environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution. There was a positive correlation between environmental change, conceptual understanding, and awareness of social contribution regardless of the opportunity to participate in matches. Moreover, in the 2022–2023 season, more social contribution

Table 3 Correlation matrix between variables in the 2022–2023 season

	Environmental Change	Conceptual Understanding	Awareness of Social Contribution
Environmental Change	—	.592 *	.622 *
Conceptual Understanding	.457 *	—	.443 *
Awareness of Social Contribution	.432 *	.386 *	—

Notes. Asterisks indicate $p < .0167$ (Bonferroni-corrected).

The off-diagonal elements indicate the results for the starting member in the upper triangle and for the substitute member in the lower triangle.

activities were held and participated in events than visit, exchange, and volunteer activities. This trend differed from the social contribution activities conducted in the 2021–2022 season. For example, in the 2022–2023 season, there were many social contribution activities in which all players participated (INAC Kobe Leonessa, 2022; Urawa Reds Ladies, 2023) and athlete participation in the program from conception to implementation (Chifure AS Elfen Saitama, 2023; Mynavi Sendai Ladies, 2023). In this way, the athletes were actively engaged in social contribution activities in a multifaceted manner.

4. Discussion

4.1. Awareness of Social Contribution Varies Depending on the Opportunity to Participate in Matches and the Season

This study demonstrated a higher score among the substitute group than for the starter group in the first season (2021–2022 season) in awareness of social contribution, whereas no difference was evident between the two groups in the second season (2022–2023 season). One reason for this may be that the clubs were struggling in many ways in the first season of the WE League due to the fact that all players were required by the WE League to conduct their own social contribution activities during the season. In particular, club staff had to coordinate players' schedules to allow participation in social contribution activities. As it was during the season, it would have been more difficult for the starter group, who would have had greater opportunities to play, than the substitute group, who would have had fewer opportunities to play. In addition, club staff seemed to be searching for ways to incorporate WE ACTION as a social contribution activity in the individual clubs (Shoji, 2022, pp. 60–61). Collaborating with organizations outside clubs, as was the case in the second season, requires a greater amount of time to coordinate activity content and schedules compared to social contribution activities conducted by the clubs alone. In the first season, therefore, many of the social contribution activities that could be carried out by the clubs, activities such as joint soccer training sessions (Nippon TV Tokyo Verdy Beleza, 2021) and community cleanup activities (INAC Kobe Leonessa, 2021), were carried out only by the individual clubs rather than in collaboration with

outside organizations. Moreover, due to the impact of COVID-19 infection during the first season, a smaller number of players participated in various small-scale activities (Urawa Reds Ladies, 2021). Therefore, it is likely that not all players were able to participate in the social contribution activities of their individual clubs; and it is likely to have been significantly more difficult for the starter group to participate than it would have been for the substitute group. If club staff are struggling, or their activities and time are limited, it would be difficult to develop an awareness of social contribution. These factors may have led to the result that the starter group had a lower awareness of social contribution than the substitute group did.

With the exception of two items related to awareness of social contribution for the starter group, the scores for awareness of social contribution showed a tendency to be lower in the second season than in the first. In this study, statistical analysis considering correspondence between data was not possible because it was unclear how respondents overlapped in Studies 1 and 2. Therefore, we were unable to determine the statistical significance of this trend. To address this issue, we investigated the factors that caused this tendency in an exploratory manner. One possible factor is that the first season included credo creation and technical seminars, while neither was included in the second season. In the creation of the credo at the start of the WE League, discussions and exchanges were held not only within the individual clubs, but also among the clubs; and players took the initiative in creating their own code of conduct (JFA Women's Committee, 2022). The technical seminar was provided to give players an opportunity to recognize the international-level tactics and the strengths of soccer players in the WE League by the members of the Technical Committee of the Japan Football Association (Japan Women's Empowerment Professional Football League, 2021). These opportunities were considered helpful for players, who are mainly involved in competitive activities within each club, to exchange opinions with players in other clubs on strategies to deal with the situation as professional soccer players. If this had not been the case, then there would have been no opportunity for mutual improvement among clubs and players. This raises the potential, therefore, that players in the second season were less aware of social contribution than in the first season. From the above, raising awareness of social contribution may

require that opportunities be provided for mutual improvement among clubs and players.

4.2. Relationship Between Awareness of Social Contribution, Environmental Change, and Conceptual Understanding

No correlation was revealed between environmental change and awareness of social contribution among the substitute group in the first season; however, the second season revealed a positive correlation between the two. The correlation coefficients were moderately positive, and the correlation coefficients were more pronounced in the second season than in the first. The difference in results between seasons may be attributable to the fact that the content of social contribution activities differed in each season. In the activities frequently seen in the first season, such as “visit, exchange, and volunteer activities,” players provided soccer-based activities, which is considered player resources, to others and to society. On the other hand, in the second season, there were fewer “visits, exchanges, and volunteer activities” and more events in which players learned and collaborated with other organizations. For example, players participated in study sessions on child abuse and inclusivity before participating in visits to orphanages and CP soccer experience events (Nojima Stella Kanagawa Sagami-hara, 2023). This indicates that a significant amount of content was included with an awareness of the connection with society. In general, social contribution activities in collaboration with other organizations are thought to lead to the conception of a future society and the creation of new value by viewing social issues as one's own affairs (Miyagaki, 2020, p. 19). Regardless of the opportunity to participate in matches, this may have established a clear relationship between awareness of social contribution and environmental change.

4.3. Limitations of the Study

A number of variables are thought to influence the awareness of social contribution, not only in soccer activities, but also within the family and club environment in which the player is raised. However, this survey was unable to investigate these aspects. In the future, it will be necessary to investigate the factors and background information that raises awareness of social contribution through interviews

and additional items.

4.4. Perspectives

This study employed a survey of currently active female professional soccer players to clarify the relationship between the opportunity to participate in matches and awareness of social contribution. The WE League initiative is a rare example in that a significant number of active players are involved in a wide range of social contribution activities under league leadership. Professional athletes in team sports are generally thought to be more likely to face a dilemma in the decision to be involved in social contribution activities because team activities such as practice and matches are prioritized (Tokairin, 2022). The results of this study suggest the need for opportunities for players to interact with and support one another in an inter-club manner, and for players themselves to promote social contribution activities in cooperation with external organizations. Clarifying whether these opportunities do indeed contribute to reducing the dilemma facing athletes, however, requires longitudinal surveys within the WE League and cross-sectional surveys across other sports organizations. In addition, as this study was an exploratory survey conducted in the early days of the WE League, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions at this stage. By employing the same survey from the third season onwards, we aim to gather practical knowledge that will create opportunities for players to engage in social contribution activities while maintaining a high level of engagement.

Notes

¹ In this study, the social contribution activities of professional soccer players are “off-the-pitch activities that utilize the resources of professional soccer players to solve social issues,” as defined by Ogiso et al. (2021).

² Based on the reports published by the Sharen! Awards (<https://www.jleague.jp/sharen/awards2023/>) from 2020 to 2023, there were 19 out of 56 (1 case) in 2020, 18 out of 57 (1 case) in 2021, 18 out of 58 (2 cases) in 2022, and 26 out of 60 cases (2 cases) of social contribution activities in which current active professional soccer players were involved. Numbers in parentheses are the number of social contribution activities in which all players were involved. With

the exception of a few cases, most of the social contribution activities are carried out by one or several retired players.

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