



## COMPARISON ON BRAND AWARENESS OF CHINESE AND FOREIGN SPORTING GOODS: AN INVESTIGATION AMONG CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

*Brand awareness plays an important role in brand construction and brand recognition, which is regarded as the foundation for brand development. To some extent, brand awareness can directly influence consumers' purchase intention. Taking Chinese college students who will become main consumers in the future as the research object, the author seeks to investigate and analyze brand's objective factors and consumer's subjective factors in influencing brand awareness of the Chinese and foreign sports brands. The aim of this paper is, on one hand, to explore and identify the current awareness of Chinese and foreign sports brands. On the other hand, based on the comparison on brand awareness between Chinese and foreign sporting goods, to make recommendations on strategies for Chinese sports brands to catch up with their foreign counterparts.*

**Key Words:** College student, Sporting goods, Brand awareness, Objective factors, Subjective factors

### INTRODUCTION

With China's accession to the WTO, more and more foreign sporting goods enterprises are swarming into China, vying for big market. In recent years, major players such as Nike and Adidas have firmly secured their presence in first-tier Chinese cities, and have also penetrated into the second-tier and third-tier cities. On the other hand, Chinese local sports brands including Lining and Anta are gathering strength and competing with big foreign brands. Chinese college students, who will become main consumers in the future, have a strong group identity and are constantly after stylish

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and fashionable products. With the popularization of the internet, they have fast access to first-hand information on fashion. Therefore, the author takes Chinese college students as the research object and studies the factors of the brand awareness that influences consumers' purchase intention for Chinese and foreign sports brands. Literature shows us the following views and findings. Aaker considers in the developed model that awareness refers to the level of name and symbol recognition of a particular brand. Besides that, Aaker also takes into account determinant behavioral vectors of brand equity, brand loyalty, supposed or perceived quality, brand associations, as well as other brand merits such as patents, distribution systems or other various marks (Aaker, 2004). Keller presents that brand awareness, together with its image, are the vectors that compose brand knowledge (Keller, 1993; Keller, 2003). He draws the conclusion that awareness has two dimensions (Keller, 2003), consisting of the depth of awareness levels (ease and speed of brand recall) and the width of awareness facets (specific situations when a person is able to remember certain brand characteristics). Brand awareness can be measured through brand recall or brand recognition. Brand recall reflects the ability of consumers to retrieve the brand from their memory when given the product category, the needs fulfilled by the category, or some other type of probe as a cue. Brand recognition reflects the ability of consumers to confirm prior exposure to the brand (Miladian & Babu, 2009). Li Kun argues that there are subjective and objective factors that influence consumer's brand awareness (Li, 2007), but he hasn't analyzed them in detail. Therefore, the above literature review has led to the formulation of a proposed conceptual model as shown in Figure 1. There are three key questions which will be examined in the study:

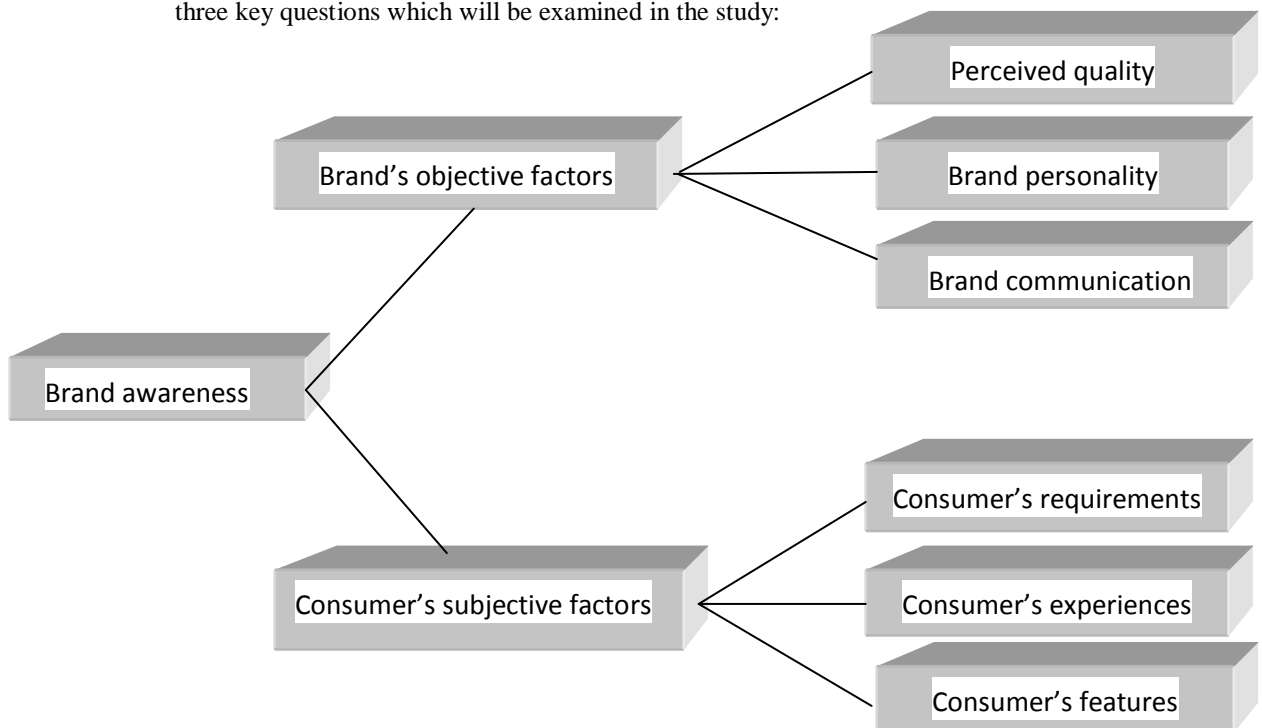


Figure-1. The structure of brand awareness

- (1) What are the factors in influencing brand awareness of sports brands?
- (2) What is the current status of brand awareness of Chinese and foreign sports brands?
- (3) What's inspiration for Chinese sporting goods enterprises?

## METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Prior to the formal survey, a survey among 12 experts was conducted in the form of questionnaire and found valid and reliable for the research. After refining some questions, an improved questionnaire was developed. Then the questionnaire was distributed among 210 college students with a response rate of 91%. The obtained data were then processed by SPSS.

## RESULTS

### Brand's Objective Factors

#### Perceived Quality

**Table-1.** The evaluation of perceived quality of foreign and Chinese sports brands

	Satisfaction with foreign brands		Satisfaction with Chinese brands	
	abs	%	abs	%
Product Quality	175	83.3	58	27.6
Category and Design	166	79.0	79	37.6
After-sales Service	92	43.8	51	24.3
Total	210	100	210	100

**Legend:** abs. – absolute frequencies; % – relative frequencies

As table 1 shows, the perception of major foreign sports brands is better than that of Chinese brands in product quality, product categories, design and after-sales service. About 83.3% of the respondents prefer foreign brand quality, compared with 27.6% for Chinese brands. 79.0% believe that foreign product categories and design are better than those of Chinese brands whose approval rate is only 37.6%. In addition, the satisfaction with after-sales service for foreign and Chinese brands tallies 43.8% and 24.3% respectively.

Perceived quality is an awareness level to some product or service and a subjective judgment to product information, relating to product attribute (Wang, 2007). From the results we can see that Chinese product quality is not good enough and gives a poor first impression among consumers. Therefore, even if the Chinese product quality has improved greatly, consumers' stereotype still persists. On the other hand, sports enterprises are much younger than those in developed countries, and therefore less sophisticated in manufacturing know-how and R&D. So, the brand credibility of Chinese brands is lower than major foreign brands among Chinese consumers. According to some sources, many consumers would rather spend \$500 on a pair of average basketball shoes with a famous foreign brand than high-end shoes with a Chinese brand in the same category. This is understandable.

### **Brand Personality**

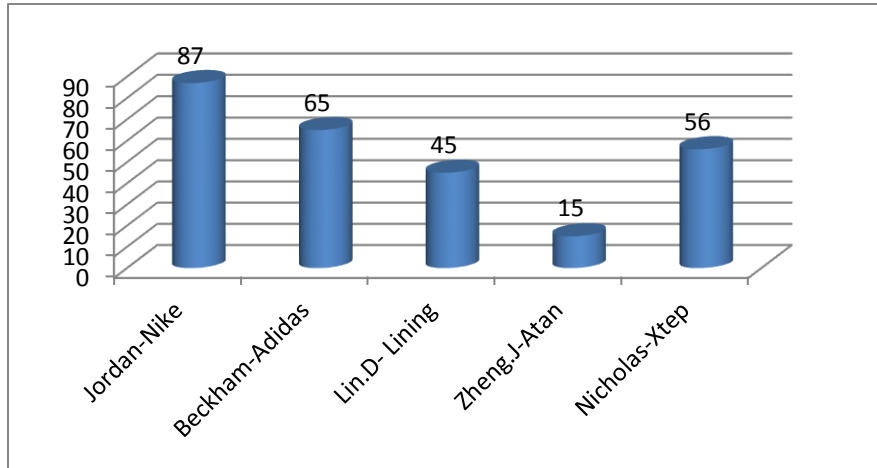
In the questionnaire, brand slogans are also examined. For example, which brand says "Impossible is nothing"? The result shows that only 48% students choose the correct answer "Adidas", 44% students falsely choose "Lining". Lining's slogan is "Anything is possible". Their similarity makes it difficult for ordinary consumers to distinguish. As a symbol of corporate culture, the slogan needs to be unique to a brand and appeal to consumers. Obviously Chinese brands have to work harder on this front.

In brand logo, the similarities between original Lining, K-bird, Anta and Nike are examined. Students think the levels of similarity are 68.1%, 37.1%, 32.9% respectively. Some researchers believe Lining's new logo and slogan may be related with considerations to avoid similarity (He, 2010). Regarding brand culture, Adidas advocates fashionable, modern and cool products, but Lining is also about charm, fashion and etc. So we can see, Lining is more or less an Adidas wannabe and thus it is difficult to impress consumers deeply without a unique spirit. Practically speaking, a strong brand must have a clear and broad-based recognition, or it could hardly fulfill its potential and risks being seen as homogeneous products and mired in price competition.

### **Brand Communication**

One statement shows that advertising is indispensable and cannot be discontinuous for enhancing brand awareness. (Tan, 2009) Famous foreign sports brands are very serious about advertising. For example, Nike invested 280 million USD on the advertising in 1994 and got huge economic benefits.

Since then, Nike has been increasing its advertising investment each year. Nowadays advertising plays an important role in communication between the brand and consumers. In a sense, it is generally about the positive public image of the spokesperson.



**Figure- 2.** Awareness to different brand spokesman for college students

Nike’s spokespersons include Michael Jordan, a basketball star; Tiger Woods, a golf star; and Roger Federer, a tennis star. Adidas’ spokespersons are Tracy McGrady a basketball star, Kaká and David Beckham, who are football stars, etc. For Chinese brands, Lin Dan, men’s badminton world champion, endorses Lining while tennis player Zheng Jie speaks for Anta. Among them, Nike’s brand awareness is rated as high as 87%, Adidas at 65%, Lining 45% and Anta at 15% only (figure 2). The survey finds that spokespersons of famous foreign brands are international sports stars with a more extensive and profound reputation. They have a longer sports life, more distinct heroism characteristics and a wider impact as well as enhanced exposure over the internet and television media. This undoubtedly increases influence. But Chinese brand spokespersons are just local sports stars. Although they participate in world events and win world titles, the extent of their reputation and popularity is relatively narrow. So it is hard to have a profound and extensive impact. In addition, the survey also shows that female college students prefer entertainment artists, For example, the brand awareness of Xtep that Nicholas Tse speaks for is more than 61%.

Another important factor is public relations (PR). A successful PR program does not necessarily cost a lot of money. More important are great ideas and effective implementation (Seroka, 2011). Foreign brands are expert in PR to build brand image and enhance brand awareness. For example, when Nike sponsors any sporting event, it always spreads the idea “Just Do It”, “sports, performance, free and easy” to embody its brand personality. For Adidas, all marketing strategies are based on its brand spirit and product features. For Chinese brands, marketing and brand culture are not so well connected, although it is still somewhat effective.

## **Consumer's Subjective Factors**

### **Consumer's Requirements**

It has been found that the more you need a product, the more you will care about the brand of the product. On one hand, college students need sporting goods for physical education classes and playing. On the other hand, because the most advanced enterprises are a wind vane of the brand personality and fashion, there exists a larger consumer market. But 80% of college students live with less than 1200 RMB per month. 76.7% spend no more than 50 RMB on sporting goods every month. The author has counted the number of sporting goods that each students has possessed, and found that 72.9% of college students have 2-5 pieces but 12.9% students own more than five items. In brief, Chinese college students' purchasing power of sporting goods is relatively low due to their limited financial capacity. But beyond doubt they will be main consumers in the future.

### **Consumer's Experiences**

Consumers who own abundant brand experiences have a more comprehensive and deeper awareness of brands than those who don't. It turns out that 66.7% of students surveyed approve of consumer experience of foreign brands and 85.7% students will continue to buy foreign sporting goods.

### **Consumer's Features**

The feature of consumer is a complicated factor. It includes consumer's gender, age, occupation, religious beliefs and personality factors. Different consumers have different brand awareness for different products. 54.8% college students think the international brands are better than Chinese brands in pursuing characteristics, individuality and fashion, while those features are what the college students pursue. Having surveyed on college students' favorite sports brands, the author finds that the percentage of college students who choose Nike, Adidas, Lining, Anta tallies 64.8%, 42.9%, 6.7%, 2.9% respectively. (Choose the top two of foreign and Chinese brands).

## **DISCUSSION**

To date, many studies have proven that brand awareness is the most fundamental asset. High brand awareness can help to enhance understanding of the brand among target consumers and make it become a candidate brand when the consumer wants to purchase certain products. It is the most important factor at the primary stage of competition. However, most of the studies lay emphasis on the brand's objective factors. In contrast, many researchers have failed to focus on consumer's subjective factors. Thus the study is intended to highlight brand's objective factors and consumer's subjective factors. It is more comprehensive to investigate and analyze the brand awareness of the Chinese and foreign sports brands.

Another important point needs to be noted that based on the data analysis, there is certain spatial difference between Chinese and international sports brands. In order to catch up with international sports brands, the priority is to enhance awareness of Chinese sports brands. One, imitation is necessary at the initial stage of development of the enterprise. Facts have approved that many famous brands also start from imitation, but imitation is not meant to manufacture the same products. What an enterprise imitates is to develop its personality. Only those successful decisions, norms and behaviors should be imitated. Two, according to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, consumer's requirements are gradually evolving with constantly satisfaction, the reasonable brand characteristics or brand promise may gradually be abandoned or forgotten by consumers. Therefore, in order to meet the diverse needs of consumers, the enterprise should take important strategy by the brand extension to enrich the connotation of the brand. Three, the brand culture is the foundation for survival and development for any company in competition. All the more, it is the key to becoming invincible in the fierce market competition. Brand culture is gradually formed in the development of enterprise, representing the perceived value and emotional closeness of the enterprise and consumer. It is the sum of brand, traditional culture and self-image of the enterprise. Now the cultural constructions of many Chinese sporting goods companies lack cultural foundation and personality, some of them are empty and similar. So if they want to catch up with international sporting goods enterprises, it is very important to strengthen the cultural construction of the brand. Four, in order to facilitate effective communication between the enterprise and the consumer, marketing is the most commonly employed as one of means. With the development of the times, more and more marketing means and methods are applied. In order to let more consumers improve their awareness of some kinds of brands, effective marketing which not only reflects the brand features but also caters to consumer's characteristics is the key.

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