

# RESEARCH ON BRAND EXPERIENTIAL IMAGE POSITIONING OF SPORTS SHOES FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Summary:** *The primary objective of this study is to explore the positioning of brand images among the six top-selling sports shoe brands in the Chinese market as perceived by consumers. By conducting a comparative analysis of these brand images, the study aims to gain insights into the ideal brand image that resides in consumers' minds. To accomplish this, the research involved the distribution of 480 questionnaires to college and university students, employing purposive sampling techniques. Impressively, the study achieved a high response rate, with 480 questionnaires returned and a total of 468 valid questionnaires, resulting in an impressive effective rate of 97.5%. The findings of this research offer valuable insights into the distinctions between the brand images of these six prominent sports shoe brands. Notably, the most pronounced variation in performance across these brands pertains to their experiential image. Nike emerges as the leader in this category with a remarkable experiential image score of 3,998, indicating its exceptional performance. Adidas follows closely behind as the second-best performer with a score of 3,960, while Asics, Anta, Puma and Sketcher occupy subsequent positions. The implications of these findings hold significance for the sports shoe industry and its key players. They shed light on the pivotal role of experiential image in shaping consumers' perceptions and preferences. Understanding these nuances can guide brand strategies and help brands align more effectively with consumer expectations and desires. Further discussion of these implications can provide valuable insights for industry stakeholders.*

**Keywords:** *Brand experiential; Image positioning; Sports shoes; University students*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the rise of national fitness heatwave, sports have become another major hotspot for the general public. Sports consumption has also become agitated, with many domestic and foreign enterprises having entered the sports industry market (Jiang, 2011). The six best-selling sports shoes brands include Nike, Adidas, Puma, Sketchers, Anta, and Asics, etc. (hereinafter referred to as the six brands) (Zhang, 2019), showing that this industry has a high degree of concentration (Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986). With the rise of the national fitness frenzy in recent years, the overall consumption of sports shoes has shown double-digit growth trend (Schramm, & Taube, 2007; Borts, 2018), rising from 60.280 billion RMB in 2011 to 92.993 billion RMB in 2015 (Mak, 2013). With the overall development of the

economy, the family spending power and living conditions have gradually increased and the quality of life of the university student population has been improved. The consumption momentum of the student consumer group in the sports shoes sales market cannot be ignored. Thus, it is of paramount importance to study the purchase intention of university students toward sports shoes brands so as to obtain the positioning of the brand image of sports shoes.

With the advent and progression of global economic integration, competition transcending national boundaries has entered a new era. Consequently, the field of marketing has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a focus on product dominance, which previously secured a leading competitive position for enterprises, to a paradigm centered on brand

dominance (Sheth, Sisodia, & Sharma, 2000; Humphrey & Mandel, 2020). Larry Light, renowned for his insight, famously declared, "The marketing battleground of the future will revolve around brands pitted against brands, a contest for brand supremacy" (Yu, 2001). As a result, the significance of cultivating a positive brand image is elevated (Chang, 2011). This entails not only achieving a certain level of brand awareness but also forging profound connections with consumers, thereby providing them with intangible benefits. In return, this fosters a heightened inclination towards active engagement and engenders brand loyalty (Xin, 2007).

The purpose of this research is to explore the sports shoes brand image : Experiential image of the six brands in the minds of university students. According to the specific characteristics of sports shoes, comparing the differences in the brand images of the six sports shoes will help enterprises to understand the purchase intention and needs of students' consumer groups, thereby doing an excellent job of market segmentation to draw up an image plan that will be helpful to the development of the enterprise and assist in developing a product image plan. Based on the sales of sports shoes of major brands among students, this study develops the following three research questions: (1) What is the background information of this research sample? (2) What is the performance and importance of the brand image of the six major brands of sports shoes? (3) What are the differences between the brand images of the six major brands of sports shoes?

A sports shoe brand encompasses a complex amalgamation of symbolic and intangible elements, including attributes, names, prices, reputation, and functionality, among others. It encapsulates how consumers perceive and imbue a pair of sneakers with meaning, representing their life experiences and the trust and significance they associate with that particular pair (Qiu, 2009). Simultaneously, it serves as the collective definition formed by a multitude of consumers based on their own

encounters, aiding in the recognition of sellers' strategies and services while distinguishing products and services from those of competitors (Yu, 2004).

Within the context of this study, the brand image of sports shoes pertains to the perceptions and emotions elicited in consumers who have either personally used the shoes, encountered advertisements and information about the brands, or sought insights from others. Consequently, the diverse values and benefits that sports shoe brands offer to users form the cornerstone of the brand image (Qiu, 2009). To assess this concept, the study employs a combination of literature analysis and factor analysis, ultimately identifying a key factor referred to as the "Experiential image" of sports shoe brands. The research methodology adopted for this purpose involves the distribution of questionnaires to students at Lingnan Normal University (LNNU).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we describe a brief review of the literature. In section 3, we develop the research methods. Section 4 presents the results and discussion of the study. Section 5 provides conclusions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Brand image

Many scholars define brand image as consumers' association and perception of a brand. It is often defined as the association of a brand in consumers' minds, the perception of the brand by consumers, and the associations of consumers with the brand (Jiang, 2011). It is the consumer's intrinsic perception of the products, the overall perception of the brand that the consumer has acquired through a series of channels (Zhang, 2011). For buyers and consumers' perception and overall view of the brand, it affects consumers' purchase desire and consumption behaviour of this brand (Qin, Qiu, & Wu, 2011). Brand image is a collection of consumers' associations with a brand (Jiao, Lu, & Chen, 2004). Qiu (2009) has emphasized that

the elements constituting a brand image should encompass several dimensions, including the corporate dimension, product dimension, human dimension, and symbolic dimension.

In a parallel vein, Jiao (2018) has advanced the idea that brand image factors constitute a comprehensive reflection of the elements comprising a product in the potential perceptions and holistic associations of consumers. This viewpoint parallels the perspective put forth by Park et al. (1986), who proposed that the components of brand image encompass the significance of a product's functionality, its symbolism, and the meaning derived from the product experience (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986).

The components of brand image in this study is product experience. The definition of brand image should be that consumers purchase or use a brand for a long time in the state of association and perception, so as to generate trust and dependence on the brand's products, and it is the buyer's recognition of the brand to form the brand image. To make consumers recognize a brand, it is not only about brand associations, but also for brands to show strong functionality that satisfies consumers, as well as a symbol to satisfy consumers' psychological needs and an experience that makes customers feel comfortable (DeChernatony, 1993; Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006).

### **Research on sports shoes brand image**

As China's social economy has continued to progress and evolve, the sports shoes industry in the country has witnessed steady growth, prompting an increase in research focused on the brand image of sports shoes. Over the past decade, several studies have delved into this subject within the Chinese context. Here is a summary of notable research in this area: Jiao (2018) conducted a study examining the impact of sports shoes brand image on the purchasing intentions of post-90s consumers, employing the Bell model. The study treated the dimensions of sports shoes brand image as independent variables, consumer purchase intentions as

dependent variables, and perceived value as a mediating variable. Jiao (2018) also emphasized the correlation between the dimensions of sports shoes brand image and their influence on purchase intentions. Zhang (2011) conducted empirical research to investigate the influence of sports shoes brand image on the purchasing intentions of Hangzhou university students. This study incorporated both domestic and foreign literature to establish a Bell model, revealing the relationship between sports shoes brand image and the purchase intentions of students. Mai (2013) established a research model centered on the dimensions of sports shoes brand image to explore how brand image influences consumers' purchase intentions. The study sought to unveil the relationship between these factors. Jiang (2011) examined the relationship between different dimensions of brand image and brand loyalty in the context of domestic sports shoes. The research aimed to provide insights and recommendations for the development of brand image in China's sports shoes industry. Qin, Qiu, and Wu (2009) adopted a combination of literature review and qualitative research methods to construct a mechanism model for the brand image of sports shoes. This model was designed to elucidate the intricate relationships within the domain of sports shoes brand image. These studies collectively contribute to our understanding of the brand image of sports shoes in China, shedding light on its impact on consumer behavior, purchase intentions, and brand loyalty within the evolving sports footwear market.

This research plays a pivotal role in filling the voids that exist within the current realm of knowledge. It is designed to serve as a crucial response to these gaps by undertaking a comprehensive exploration of the positioning of brand images within the sports shoe industry, with a specific focus on the perceptions of student consumers. The overarching objective is to unravel the unique advantages and strategies that different brands employ, thereby illuminating the intricate dimensions of brand

image in this particular context. Through this endeavor, the research endeavors to provide a more lucid comprehension of how consumers, especially students, formulate and place brand image within their minds. This invaluable perspective can serve as a catalyst for brands, enabling them to refine their strategies and establish deeper connections with their intended audience.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### Research instruments

The research questionnaire comprises a single section, detailed in Table 1. This section primarily focuses on evaluating the performance of the six major sports shoe brands. In accordance with previous research conducted by Qin, Qiu, and Wu (2011) and Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis (1986), a custom scale has been developed specifically for assessing the experiential image. The experiential image is intended to measure how well a brand meets consumers' functional needs, encompassing aspects related to consumer utility and benefits derived from product usage. This dimension includes a total of seven questions. Additionally, the symbolic image dimension gauges how effectively a brand satisfies needs related to role promotion, group membership, or self-identification, featuring a total of five items. The questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert scale for participants to express their responses, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," corresponding to scores of 5 to 1, respectively. A unique item, "never used," has been assigned a score of 0 and is treated as a missing value

within the survey instrument.

The second part of the questionnaire encompasses the evaluation of importance attributes related to the six major sports shoe brands. These attributes collectively represent the ideal evaluation criteria in the minds of sports shoe users. Respondents are asked to rank all seven items based on their perceived importance, ranging from "very important" to "very unimportant." Within this section, respondents are also invited to provide valuable demographic information and insights into their exercise behaviors. This includes details such as gender, age, university affiliation, monthly disposable income, preferred shoe brand, the brand of shoes currently worn, favored promotions offered by shoe brands during promotions, average time spent choosing shoes at sports shoe stores, typical expenditure on each pair of shoes, the frequency of exercise per week, and the average duration of each exercise session. Finally, the third part of the questionnaire is designed to collect basic information about the respondents. This comprehensive approach aims to gather a holistic understanding of the participants' preferences, behaviors, and demographics, enriching the research with diverse insights from the surveyed population.

#### Pre-test questionnaire analysis

Item analysis plays a crucial role in the evaluation of research items, aiding in assessing the quality of these items and facilitating the selection of the most reliable ones while eliminating those that do not meet the desired

**Table 1. Sports Shoes Brand Image Scale**

Variables	Structure	Items
		<b>I will choose this brand of sports shoes because (of its)</b>
Brand image	Experiential image	It can meet the needs of self-exercise (EI1)
		It can motivate me to exercise (EI2)
		It can provide a good sports experience (EI3)
		It can provide me with a comfortable feeling (EI4)

criteria (Wu, 2019). In this study, the questionnaire encompasses dimensions, with one of them being "Experiential image" consisting of 7 items. The scale employed in the survey employs a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "Strongly disagree," 2 as "Disagree," 3 as "Neutral," 4 as "Agree," and 5 as "Strongly agree." In this context, it's important to note that items scoring higher in the research indicate a more favorable brand image in the specific aspect being measured. The cumulative score of all items reflects the overall positivity of the brand image in that particular dimension.

Reliability analysis is a crucial step in research to ensure the stability and internal consistency of questionnaire items, ultimately enhancing the credibility of research findings. In this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (alpha) reliability coefficient method was employed to assess the internal consistency of the "Experiential" dimension. The reliability statistic  $\alpha$  for the "Experiential" dimension in this study was calculated to be .847. This value indicates the degree of internal consistency and stability within the scale. The fact that the  $\alpha$  coefficient values for the items in the questionnaire of this study are greater than .800 is a positive sign. It suggests that the scale exhibits strong internal consistency and stability, as per Wu Song (2019). These findings affirm that the items within the "Experiential" dimension of the questionnaire are reliable and coherent, further bolstering the research's credibility and the trustworthiness of its results. The combination

of item analysis and reliability analysis, as presented in Table 2, underscores the rigor and reliability of this study's data and measurements.

### Research subjects

In this study, the distribution of questionnaires was conducted in a manner that accounted for the proportion of students enrolled in the 17 universities selected as research subjects. A total of 480 questionnaires were distributed, and remarkably, all 480 were successfully recovered, resulting in a 100% recovery rate. Following a careful review of the collected responses, 12 questionnaires were identified as invalid and subsequently excluded from the analysis. As a result, the study retained a total of 468 valid questionnaires, which translates to an impressive effective questionnaire rate of 97.5%. This high response rate and careful handling of questionnaire data contribute to the robustness and reliability of the research, underscoring the quality of the data collected for the study's analysis and findings.

### Data analysis methods

After collecting the questionnaires, SPSS 22.0 software was employed to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the demographic background information, brand image performance, and importance attribute evaluation to understand the various data of the questionnaire. Multi-scale analysis has been conducted to indicate the differences between the brand images and the distance from the ideal points between the brand images.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Background information analysis

**Table 2. Item Analysis and Reliability Analysis Scales**

Dimensions	Items	$\alpha$	Corrected items total correlation	C.R. value
Experiential image	EI1	0.847	0.77	-7.803*
	EI2		0.58	-12.058*
	EI3		0.766	-7.161*
	EI4		0.601	-7.217*

The data of this study showed that most respondents to the questionnaire were female university students accounting for 69.9%, and males accounting for 30.1% (the ratio of males to females in the original school was 7:3). Questionnaire respondents aged 21 or above accounting for 53.4%, followed by 20-years old with 25.0%, 19-years old with 17.3%, and under 18-year-old with 4.3% of the lowest.

The largest number of subjects were from the School of Arts and Communication (20.1%), followed by the School of Physical Education (15.0%) (the School of Arts and Communication has a larger number of subjects, and the School of Physical Education has a higher number of subjects because of its athletic needs. So, the proportion of the two is higher), the School of Education (7.1%), the School of Business (6.4%), the School of Law and Politics (6.0%), the School of Physics (5.8%), the School of Engineering (5.6%), the School of Mathematics (5.6%), the School of Foreign Languages (5.1%), the School of Chemical Engineering (4.5%), the School of Mechanical and Electrical Engineering (3.8%), the School of Life Sciences (3.8%), the School of Teacher Training & Education (3.4%), the School of Fine Arts (3.0%), the School of Music (3.0%), and the School of Marxism (1.9%) was the lowest.

**Disposable pocket money:** The subjects have the highest monthly allowance of 701-900 RMB (accounting for 37.2%), followed by below 3000 RMB (25%), 301-500 RMB (23.9%), and 501-700 RMB (13.9%).

The highest percentage of subjects spent less than one hour in the store (72.2%), followed by one to two hours (19.4%), two to three hours (4.5%), and more than three hours (3.8%). Subjects spent the most money on sports shoes (41.9%) in the range of \$201-400, followed by

less than \$200 (23.1%); \$401-600 (19.4%), \$601-800 (10.0%), and \$801 or more (5.6%) were the lowest. The average weekly exercise time of the subjects was: less than two times (40%), followed by three times (29.7%), four times (12.8%), more than six times (11.1%), and five times (6.2%) was the lowest. Subjects exercised for up to 30 minutes per session (44.7%), followed by 31-60 minutes (42.5%), 61-90 minutes (8.8%), and 91 minutes or more (4.1%) as the lowest, followed by three times (29.7%), four times (12.8%), more than six times (11.1%), and five times (6.2%) was the lowest. Subjects exercised for up to 30 minutes per session (44.7%), followed by 31-60 minutes (42.5%), 61-90 minutes (8.8%), and 91 minutes or more (4.1%) as the lowest.

### **Descriptive statistics**

#### **Statistical analysis to ideal point estimates**

There are three ideal points in these research items (see Table 3), and the minimum score for each ideal point is 1 point, and the maximum is 5 points. The data in this study show that in the average score of 468 valid questionnaires, functional image (4.154), standard deviation (.586).

#### **Statistical analysis of experiential image**

According to the data (see Table 4), Nike has the highest score of 3.998, and a standard deviation of .661 ranks first; followed by Adidas (3.960) with a standard deviation of .672 ranks second; Asics (3.788) with a standard deviation of .68170 ranks sixth, Anta (3.761) with a standard deviation of .681 ranks fifth, Puma (3.750) with a standard deviation of .681 ranks fourth, Sketchers (3.725) with a standard deviation of .675 ranks third. According to the data, the experiential image of the six major brands has not reached the ideal point. And Nike has the highest score and is closest to the ideal

**Table 3. Statistical Analysis to Ideal Point Estimates**

Structure	Number	Average	Standard deviation
Experiential image	468	4,108	0.648

**Table 4. Experiential Image Statistics**

Variablie items	Number	Average	Standard deviation
Nike	381	3,998	0.661
Adidas	372	3,960	0.672
Puma	318	3,750	0.681
Sketchers	293	3,725	0.675
Anta	424	3,761	0.681
Asics	284	3,788	0.682

**Table 5. Scale Analysis of Experiential Image Diversification**

Experiential image	Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Stress Coefficient	RSQ Value
Nike	1,302	-836	0.255	0.827
Adidas	1,067	-822		
Puma	-0.704	-0.838		
Sketchers	-1,383	0.081		
Anta	-1,257	0.086		
Asics	-0.356	1,083		
Ideal Point	1,332	1,419		

point. Thus, Nike has a better experiential image among the six major brands.

**Results of the Statistical Analysis**

The data of this study indicates that among the six brands, Nike scored 4.154, closest to the ideal point of the Experiential image, and the average score of the available image 3.998 ranked first closest to the ideal point. Adidas (3.960) Asics (3.788) are the next in line. These three brands occupy the top three in the average score of Experiential images. The next order is respectively Puma (3.750), Anta(3.761), Sketchers (3.725).

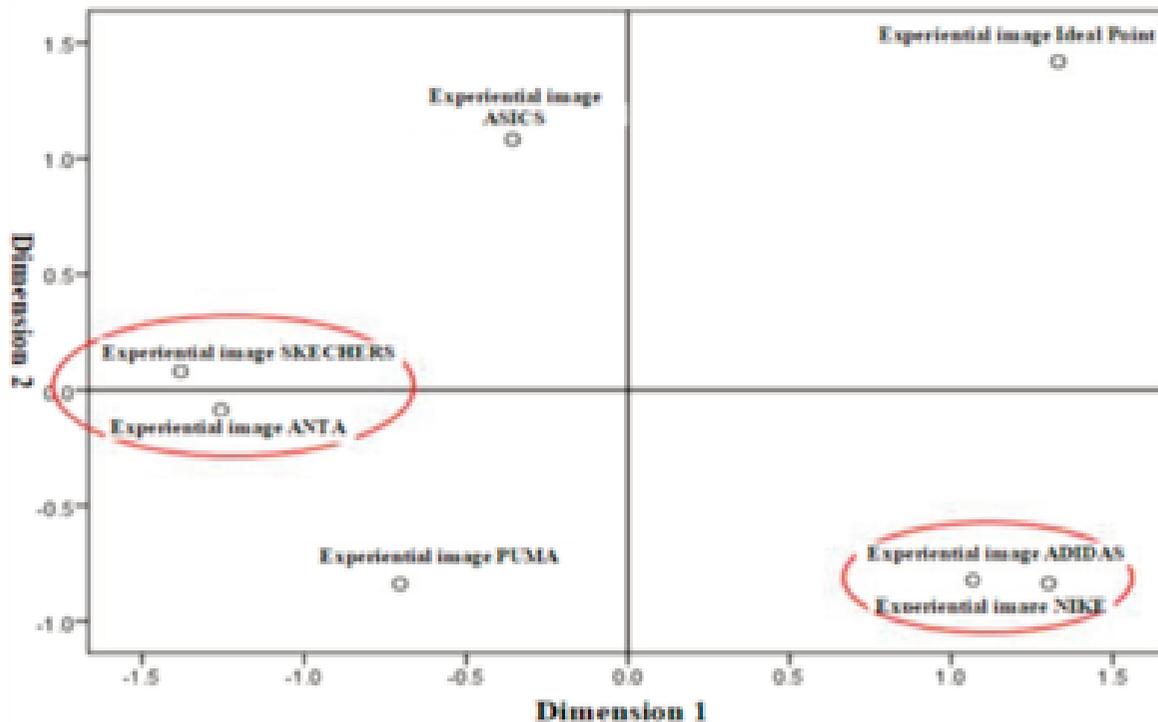
4.3.1 Brand Image Perceptual Positioning Map Analysis: This study uses a multi-scale perceptual map of brand image to understand the competitive advantages of each brand, and at the same time better understand what the ideal

point of the brand is in the university students' minds. In addition, it helps position the image of each sports shoes brand.

**Brand experiential image diversification scale analysis**

As shown in Table 5, the stress coefficient of the brand experiential image is .255, and the RSQ value of .827 indicates that the symbolic image perception map graph is well adapted to the questionnaire data. Furthermore, the perceptual map indicated that in the minds of consumers, the experiential image and ideal point are divided into five groups, respectively: symbolic image ideal point, Nike and Adidas; Sketchers and Anta; Asics; and Puma.

We can see that Nike and Adidas form the same competitive group; Sketchers and Anta also form the same competitive group, while



**Figure 1. Experiential image perception of sports shoes brands**

Asics and Puma have their experiential image characteristics. Even though Nike, the best performer, only has a difference of .03, there is still a gap between the ideal brand image and the ideal experiential brand image in the consumers' minds. In terms of strengths and weaknesses, the order of performance in terms of ideal point is the following: → Nike → Adidas → Asics → Puma → Anta → Sketchers (See Figure 1).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results of this study based on the above analysis led to specific conclusions.

The current situation of background information on students' consumer groups: In the demographic background statistics, female students aged 21 or older, with disposable pocket money of 701-900 RMB, spending less than one hour in the store, and spending 201-400 RMB on a pair of sports shoes were the most popular. Therefore, it is concluded that the consumption group of students, in this case, is mainly female, the disposable pocket money is also relatively high, and the consumption efficiency has reached the middle to the upper level. Therefore, it is easy to see that the

spending power of university students cannot be ignored. The current status of the image of the six significant sports shoes brand image: In the experiential image, Nike scored 4.154, closest to the ideal point of the Experiential image, and the average score of the available image 3.998 ranked first closest to the ideal point. Adidas (3.960) Asics (3.788) are the next in line. These three brands occupy the top three in the average score of Experiential images. The next order is respectively, Anta(3.761), Puma (3.750), Sketchers (3.725).

First, this study only focuses on function in investigating students' motivations for choosing sports shoe brands. It is suggested that future researchers should try to include variables such as "social support" and "consumer herd mentality" to analyze the brand image position of The best selling sports shoes in China.

Second, this study basically compares six major sports shoe brands in China. Future studies should attempt to compare more athletic shoe brands to see whether these findings will be similar or different.

Third, it is necessary to do more research on

symbolic images and functional images in the future so that more research can be done about the brand image position.

Finally, the current study data only involved students in Guangdong province, China. Therefore, the generalizability and applicability of the findings of this study to different provinces in China or overseas regions should be taken with caution. The researchers suggest that future studies should focus on other target groups in other industries to better understand the differences in image positioning of the six best-selling sports shoe brands in the US. the Chinese market in the minds of consumers..

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