

# Understanding the Brand Equity of National Football League: Evidence from Chinese Market

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22780>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22780

**Published Date:** 29 September 2024

## Abstract

The globalization of sport brands has attracted fans from all over the world. However, there is a paucity of studies regarding how sport brands are viewed in a foreign market. Hence, the purpose of this study is to understand the brand equity of the American National Football League (NFL) among Chinese fans and examine the variations in these perceptions and attitudes affected by demographic variables such as age, gender, monthly income and educational background. A quantitative research was conducted to collect data from residents of Shanghai, China on their perceptions of NFL's brand equity using convenience sampling method. Factor analysis resulted in a 10-item scale showing acceptable validity of the hypothesized brand equity dimensions. In addition, the results of analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveal that demographic variables such as age, educational background and monthly income have significant influence on brand equity. Gender only has significant influence on the brand association dimension. Meanwhile, this paper offers a few suggestions for improving the brand equity of NFL in China and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Brand Equity, Brand Awareness, Brand Association, International Marketing, National Football League

## Introduction

Brand equity is an important concept emerged in the field of marketing research in the 1980s. Professor Keller, a pioneer in brand management, believes that strong brand equity can bring multifaceted benefits to both enterprises and audiences. From the enterprise perspective, robust brand equity can increase corporate revenue, foster higher brand loyalty, and mitigate losses in market competition. For audiences, favorable brand effects can stimulate their purchase desire, reduce purchase risks, and provide emotional value derived from brand attributes (Keller 1993). Research conducted by scholars such as Cobb-Walgren (1995), has shown that strong brand equity can enhance audiences' brand preferences and purchase intentions.

In the context of professional sport, brand equity plays a pivotal role in shaping the organization's identity, attracting fans, and generating commercial success. A strong brand equity enables entities (e.g. athletes, teams, leagues, events, sponsors) to differentiate themselves from competitors, create a unique identity, and command a premium price for their products and services (Gladden 2013; Kunkel and Biscaia 2020). Furthermore, the globalization of sport brands has become a significant trend that is shaping the landscape of the sports industry. By expanding into international territories, sport brands are able to tap into the consumer bases of diverse cultures, thereby increasing their revenue potential. Kerr and Gladden (2008), introduced the concept of "satellite fans" and emphasized the importance of overseas fans. These fans play a crucial role and have the potential to significantly impact a brand's overall success as they are active supporters (Kerr and Emery 2011). For example, as a global phenomenon, the American National Football League (NFL) has hosted 28 regular season games in London since 2007 to develop United Kingdom supporters (NFL, 2018).

In recent years, NFL fans in China has seen a growth. According to a research conducted by CSM China in 2017, the NFL Chinese fan base reached 19 million, an almost 10-fold increase over the past five years. Among these 19 million fans, nearly 4 million are loyal fans, most of whom are males aged 16-30 residing in China's first- and second-tier cities. They are receptive to new things and foreign cultures, have a strong sense of curiosity, and possess a certain level of spending power (Xinhua, 2019). Additionally, according to Richard Young, NFL China's general manager, China may become NFL's most important international market after 2025 (Huanqiu, 2015).

Despite this, there has been a lack of research conducted regarding the brand equity of professional leagues in a foreign market. The author acknowledges that this is an initial study surveying the perceptions of a convenience sample of overseas residents from one location (Shanghai, China). The importance of this research lies in its application of brand equity theory to individuals residing in international markets. This, in turn, could pave the way for the development of strategies aimed at gaining supporters from across geographic borders, thereby broadening the fanbase.

## **Literature Review**

### *Brand Equity's Concept*

In the realm of marketing and brand management, there has been considerable debate regarding the conceptualization of brand equity. Farquhar (1989) posits that brand equity represents an additional value that is attributed to a product solely due to the name of the brand. This perspective underscores the role of the brand name in augmenting the perceived worth of the product. Conversely, Shocker and Weitz (1988) frame brand equity in terms of its impact on cash flow, comparing the financial performance of branded products with those without a strong brand identity. Their corporate-centric approach highlights the financial gains that accrue to organizations with established brands.

Keller (1993), offers a customer-centric perspective, defining brand equity as the differential effect that a brand knowledge structure has on consumer response to the marketing of that brand. Within his customer-based brand-equity structure model, Keller identifies brand awareness and brand image as two primary dimensions. Brand awareness, comprising brand

awareness and brand recall, encapsulates the likelihood of a brand name being invoked in consumers' minds. Brand image, or brand association, on the other hand, reflects the overall perception of a brand shaped by the associations it holds in consumers' memories. While in Aaker's (1996), brand equity model, perceived quality, brand loyalty and other proprietary brand assets are the additional three dimensions. Perceived quality refers to customers' perception of the overall quality or superiority of a product or service relative to other products or services. It represents the consumers' perceptual understanding of a brand. Brand loyalty is a psychological response generated during the interaction between consumers and a brand, manifested as consumers' commitment to repurchase or continue using the brand.

#### *Brand Equity and Professional Leagues*

Based on Aaker's (1996) brand equity model, Gladden et al (1998), proposed a conceptual framework for evaluating the brand equity of National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I athletic teams. This conceptual framework encompasses the antecedents of athletic team brand equity (e.g., team performance, coaching staff, star players, team logos, stadiums, local media coverage, and geographical location), as well as the dimensions of brand equity, which include brand awareness, brand associations, perceived brand quality, and brand loyalty. A year later, Gladden and Milne (1999), proposed a conceptual framework of brand equity from the perspective of professional leagues. It was established on the basis of the brand equity framework of college sports teams with a few adjustments.

#### *Brand Equity Model for Professional Leagues*

The overwhelming majority of brand equity research is centered on tangible products, exemplified by the aforementioned framework established by (Gladden et al., 1998). However, given the unique nature of professional league products, such models would not be applicable. These models, designed to evaluate brand equity in manufactured goods, do not align well with professional leagues, which are essentially service products. Berry (2002) highlights that the inherent characteristics of service products necessitate adjustments in branding strategies traditionally devised for tangible products.

As a service product, sport leagues possess distinctiveness. Firstly, they exhibit unpredictability (Mullin et al., 2014) . While team performance can be evaluated, and fans can indulge in predicting match outcomes, the final score remains elusive. Secondly, the consumption of sport league products is experiential (Trail et al., 2003) . Spectators consume the product as they watch live matches, replays and highlights, indicating that the consumption of sport league products is intangible.

Given the unpredictability and experiential nature of sport league products, adaptations are necessary when applying classical brand equity theories. Tailored to the uniqueness of sport league products, Ross (2006) introduced the Spectator-Based Brand Equity (SBBE) Model , which underscores the significance of customer experience. The model highlights brand awareness and brand association as two crucial indicators for consumers to evaluate and select sports services. Notably, perceived quality within this model is integrated as a component of brand associations rather than a standalone dimension. Furthermore, brand loyalty emerges as an outcome of brand equity. In the subsequent research, Ross, Keith, and Bang (2008) validated the effectiveness of the SBBE model through empirical research and

identified the key factors influencing brand awareness and brand association. Based on the review, the author offers his two research question: 1) Does the SBBE model apply to the Chinese market? 2) Does the demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, monthly income) affect the perceptions of Chinese fans?

### *Significance of this Study*

In summary, the concept of brand equity has garnered significant scholarly attention over the years, extending its reach into the domain of sports as well. Nevertheless, the majority of existing research tends to concentrate on the domestic market, while investigations from an overseas market remain scarce. Furthermore, previous sport brand equity research (Gladden et al., 1998; Gladden and Milne, 1999) relied on the manufactured goods perspective, which is unsuitable for studying professional leagues. Consequently, this research aspires to pinpoint the crucial elements that facilitate comprehension of brand equity in an international context and offer strategic insights to bolster brand worth specifically within the Chinese market.

By using the Spectator-Based Brand Equity Model (SBBE), this study develops a tool to understand the brand equity of NFL among Chinese fans. The tool will provide data on how the brand equity of NFL is perceived by fans in China. Furthermore, the study will assess the variations in these perceptions and attitudes affected by demographic factors encompassing age, gender, educational background, and monthly income. By examining these disparities, the research seeks to uncover patterns and trends that lead to strategic decision-making for the NFL in the Chinese market.

## **Methodology**

### *Pilot Study*

The pilot study involves three steps. Firstly, to select scales measuring brand awareness and brand associations from existing literature. Secondly, to determine the items that could be suitably translated into Chinese and effectively delivered to NFL fans living in China. To assess face validity, 6 professors from the School of Economics and Management were asked to rate the relevance of the items. Following collaborative efforts, certain items were reworded in Chinese for the purpose that they could be suitably understood by respondents living in China. In this study, the Likert 7-point scale was utilized, wherein the numerals "1" and "7" denote "completely disagree" and "completely agree," respectively, resulting in a total of 11 items (Table 1). Lastly, the survey was administered to a group of 61 students at Shanghai University of Sport. After factor analysis using SPSS 20, it was found that item BAS\_8 did not match the expected factor, hence item BAS\_8 was deleted.

Table 1

*Items representing brand equity*

Construct	Items
Brand Awareness	BAW_ 1 The NFL is frequently mentioned by others.
	BAW_ 2 The NFL is a household name.
	BAW_ 3 The promotion of the NFL is quite impressive.
Brand Association	BAS_ 1 Compared to other foreign sports leagues, the NFL possesses a considerably high level of quality.
	BAS_ 2 The NFL is the best in quality among foreign sports leagues.
	BAS_ 3 I believe that the NFL's competitiveness is quite impressive.
	BAS_ 4 I think the quality of the NFL is worthy of long-term trust.
	BAS_ 5 The NFL stands out as being unique.
	BAS_ 6 The characteristics of the NFL can quickly come to my mind.
	BAS_ 7 The NFL is more attractive than other foreign sports league brands.
	BAS_ 8 I can easily distinguish the NFL from other foreign sports leagues in terms of its players.

Adapted from Keller (1993); Ross, Keith and Bang (2008)

*Sampling*

The target population for this study was identified as NFL or American football fans residing in Shanghai, China. To gather pertinent data regarding brand association and brand awareness, a questionnaire consisting of 2 constructs and 10 items was carefully translated into Chinese. Another part of the questionnaire was designed to collect demographic details such as age, gender, and educational background.

Convenience sampling method was employed. Despite a lack of generalization, this method 'provide a springboard for further research or allow links to be forged with existing findings in an area'(Bryman, 2012). The data collection process involved distributing questionnaires to spectators, players and referees before, during and after 7 American football games held in Shanghai over a two-month period. A total of 471 questionnaires were distributed and collected, among which 7 were invalid. After excluding the invalid questionnaires, 464 valid questionnaires were actually collected, with an effective rate of 98.5%.

**Analysis and Results***Description of the Sample*

As can be seen from the above table, the sample is predominantly male (58.8%), with the majority of participants falling into the age groups of 18-35 (79.5%). The majority of the sample holds a bachelor's degree or above (75.6%), and their monthly income is concentrated in the ranges of 2001-5000 RMB (25.2%), 5001-8000 RMB (23.5%) and above 8001 RMB (22.6%). Furthermore, the majority of the sample has watched NFL games (78.7%).

**Descriptive Analysis**

The second part of the questionnaire constitutes the main body, focusing on measuring NFL's brand equity in the Chinese market. It comprises a total of 11 questions, among which 3

questions are designed to assess brand awareness (BAW), while the remaining 7 questions target brand associations (BAS). Specific descriptive statistical characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

*Descriptive analysis*

Item	Mean	SD
BAW_1	3.27	1.927
BAW_2	3.01	1.844
BAW_3	3.67	2.041
BAS_1	4.49	2.141
BAS_2	4.28	2.034
BAS_3	4.78	2.104
BAS_4	4.67	2.069
BAS_5	4.73	2.088
BAS_6	4.49	2.098
BAS_7	4.28	2.039

**Reliability and Validity Test**

Alpha reliability coefficient is the most commonly used method to test the internal reliability of the questionnaire (Zhang, 2024). The overall Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of this scale reached 0.957. This indicates that the reliability of this scale is excellent. Factor analysis is commonly used in analyzing validity, and exploratory factor analysis is usually used in questionnaires that have been revised on the basis of mature scales. (Zhang, 2024). As clearly shown in table 3, the commonalities of all research items are above 0.4, indicating that the information of research items can be effectively extracted. Furthermore, the KMO value is 0.934, which is greater than 0.6, suggesting that the data have validity. Additionally, the variance explanation rates after factor rotation are 57.335% and 26.513% respectively, with a cumulative variance explanation rate of 83.848% after rotation, exceeding 50%. This implies that the information content of research items can be effectively extracted. Moreover, based on the correspondence between items and factors, Factor 1 represents brand association, and Factor 2 represents brand awareness, which is consistent with the theoretical foundation of this study. In other words, the brand equity of NFL in the Chinese market is indeed composed of brand awareness and brand association.

Table 3  
*Result of Factor Analysis of Brand Equity*

	Loading		Commonality
	Factor 1	Factor 2	
BAW_ 1	0.285	<b>0.894</b>	0.881
BAW_ 2	0.224	<b>0.909</b>	0.877
BAW_ 3	0.572	<b>0.629</b>	0.723
BAS_ 1	<b>0.861</b>	0.344	0.859
BAS_ 2	<b>0.843</b>	0.342	0.827
BAS_ 3	<b>0.900</b>	0.249	0.872
BAS_ 4	<b>0.902</b>	0.257	0.879
BAS_ 5	<b>0.895</b>	0.262	0.869
BAS_ 6	<b>0.852</b>	0.268	0.797
BAS_ 7	<b>0.821</b>	0.354	0.799
Eigenvalue (after rotation)	5.734	2.651	-
Variance explanation rates (after rotation)	57.335%	26.513%	-
Cumulative variance explanation rates (after rotation)	57.335%	83.848%	-
KMO value	0.934		-
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	5230.004		-
df	45		-

**Demographic Variables**

Table 4

*Independent Samples T-Test*

Variable	Gender	Mean	SD	F	Sig	t	Sig (two-tailed)
Brand awareness	Male	3.4151	1.65690	5.983	0.015	1.458	0.145
	Female	3.1780	1.81507				
Brand association	Male	4.8980	1.83997	1.411	0.235	5.062	.000
	Female	4.0090	1.89264				

Differences in gender regarding dimensions of brand equity can be analyzed through independent samples t-test. The specific results are shown in Table 4. In summary, gender only has a significant impact on the brand association dimension of NFL's brand equity. The average brand association of males is significantly higher than that of females. There is no significant difference in brand awareness between males and females, with males slightly higher in terms of average brand awareness. This may indicate that when NFL formulates marketing strategies in China, the target audience should focus more on male groups.

Table 5

*Analysis of variance (ANOVA) on age*

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Brand awareness	Between groups	53.294	4	13.323	4.613	.001
	Within groups	1325.701	459	2.888		
	Sum	1378.995	463			
Brand association	Between groups	135.713	4	33.928	10.018	.000
	Within groups	1554.546	459	3.387		
	Sum	1690.259	463			

From Table 5, it can be drawn that age has a significant impact on brand awareness and brand association. To further clarify the specific variables of age, it is necessary to conduct a multiple comparison of age. The results are shown in Table 6. In summary, significant differences were observed in brand awareness between individuals under 18 and groups of 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, and over 45 years old. In addition, the mean value of brand awareness among those under 18 being was notably lower than that of other age groups. This may stem from the fact that younger individuals, due to their limited experience, tend to be less familiar with the NFL. Among these age groups, those aged 26-35 exhibited the highest mean value of brand awareness.

From the perspective of brand association, marked disparities were also identified between individuals under 18 and those in the age groups of 18-25, 26-35, 36-45, and over 45. The mean value of brand association for those under 18 was significantly lower than that of other



age groups. Notably, a considerable difference emerged between individuals aged 26-35 and 18-25, with the mean value of brand association for the 26-35 age group being higher than that of all other age groups. This may indicate that when NFL formulates marketing strategies in China, the target audience should focus more on the 26-35 age group.

Table 6  
Multiple comparison of age

Variable	Age (I)	Age (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Significance
Brand awareness	Below 18	18-25	-1.21494	.080
		26-35	-1.65591*	.003
		36-45	-1.59477*	.015
		Above 45	-1.76628*	.012
	18-25	Below 18	1.21494	.080
		26-35	-.44098	.131
		36-45	-.37983	1.000
		Above 45	-.55135	1.000
	26-35	Below 18	1.65591*	.0003
		18-25	.44098	.131
		36-45	.06114	1.000
		Above 45	.11037	1.000
	36-45	Below 18	1.59477*	.015
		18-25	.37983	1.000
		26-35	-.06114	1.000
		Above 45	-.17151	1.000
Above 45	Below 18	1.76628*	.012	
	18-25	.55135	1.000	
	26-35	-.11037	1.000	
	36-45	.17151	1.000	
Brand association	Below 18	18-25	-2.07916*	.000
		26-35	-2.79631*	.000
		36-45	-2.13389*	.001
		Above 45	-2.19967*	.002
	18-25	Below 18	2.07916*	.000
		26-35	-.71716*	.002
		36-45	-.05474	1.000
		Above 45	-.12051	1.000
	26-35	Below 18	2.79631*	.000
		18-25	.71716*	.002
		36-45	.66242	.232
		Above 45	.59664	1.000
	36-45	Below 18	2.13389*	.001
		18-25	.05474	1.000
		26-35	-.66242	.232
		Above 45	-0.6578	1.000
Above 45	Below 18	2.19967*	.002	

18-25	.12051	1.000
26-35	-.59664	1.000
36-45	0.6578	1.000

Table 7  
ANOVA on educational background

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Brand awareness	Between groups	81.467	5	16.293	5.751	.000
	Within groups	1297.528	458	2.833		
	Sum	1378.995	463			
Brand association	Between groups	113.884	5	22.777	6.618	.000
	Within groups	1576.375	458	3.442		
	Sum	1690.259	463			

From Table 7, it can be drawn that educational background has a significant impact on brand awareness and brand association. To further clarify the specific variables of educational background, it is necessary to conduct a multiple comparison. The results are shown in Table 8. In summary, in terms of brand awareness, there are significant differences between bachelor's degree holders and those below high school, high school, as well as master's degree. The mean value of brand awareness for bachelor's degree holders is higher than that of other educational levels, while the mean value of brand awareness for those below high school is the lowest. Regarding the dimension of brand association, there are notable differences between bachelor's degree holders and those below high school, as well as high school. Additionally, there are significant differences between master's degree holders and those below high school. The mean value of brand association for bachelor's degree holders is higher than that of other educational levels, while the mean value of brand association for those below high school remains the lowest. This may indicate that when NFL formulates marketing strategies in China, the target audience should focus more on those who have a bachelor's degree or above.

Table 8  
Multiple comparison of educational background

Variable	(i)	Age (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Significance
Brand awareness	Below school	High school	-.56524	1.000
		Associate degree	-1.13432	.248
		Bachelor's degree	-1.85108*	.000
		Master's degree	-1.32243*	.041
		Phd	-1.66156	.474
		high	.56524	1.000
	High school	Below school	-.56908	1.000
		Associate degree	-1.28583*	.003
		Bachelor's degree	-.75718	.574
		Master's degree	-1.09632	1.000
		Phd	1.13432	.248
		high	.56908	1.000
	Associate degree	Below school	-.71675	.129
		High school	-.18810	1.000
		Bachelor's degree	-.52724	1.000
		Master's degree	1.85108*	.000
		Phd	1.28583*	.003
		high	.71675	.129
	Bachelor's degree	Below school	.52865	.180
		High school	.18951	1.000
		Associate degree	1.32243*	.041
		Bachelor's degree	.75718	.574
		Master's degree	.18810	1.000
		Phd	-.52865	.180
	Master's degree	Below school	-.33914	1.000
		High school	1.66156	.474
		Associate degree	1.09632	1.000
		Bachelor's degree	-.52865	.180
Phd		-.33914	1.000	
high		1.66156	.474	
Phd	Below school	1.09632	1.000	
	High school	1.09632	1.000	

Brand association			Associate degree	.52724	1.000		
			Bachelor's degree	-.18951	1.000		
			Master's degree	.33914	1.000		
			High school	-.56524	1.000		
			Below school	high	Associate degree	-1.13432	.248
					Bachelor's degree	-1.85108*	.000
					Master's degree	-1.32243*	.041
					Phd	-1.66156	.474
			High school	high	Below school	.56524	1.000
					Associate degree	-.56908	1.000
					Bachelor's degree	-.128583*	.003
					Master's degree	-.75718	.574
			Associate degree	high	Phd	-1.09632	1.000
					Below school	1.13432	.248
					High school	.56908	1.000
					Bachelor's degree	-.71675	.129
			Bachelor's degree	high	Master's degree	-.18810	1.000
					Phd	-.52724	1.000
					Below school	1.85108*	.000
					High school	1.28583*	.003
			Master's degree	high	Associate degree	.71675	.129
					Master's degree	.52865	.180
					Phd	.18951	1.000
					Below school	1.32243*	.041
			Phd	high	High school	.75718	.574
					Associate degree	.18810	1.000
					Bachelor's degree	-.52865	.180
					Phd	-.33914	1.000
			Below school	1.66156	.474		
			High school	1.09632	1.000		

Associate degree	.52724	1.000
Bachelor's degree	-.18951	1.000
Master's degree	.33914	1.000

Table 9  
ANOVA on monthly income

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Significance
Brand awareness	Between groups	88.651	4	22.163	7.884	.000
	Within groups	1290.344	459	2.811		
	Sum	1378.995	463			
Brand association	Between groups	185.147	4	46.287	14.116	.000
	Within groups	1505.112	459	3.279		
	Sum	1690.259	463			

From Table 9, it can be drawn that monthly income has a significant impact on brand awareness and brand association. To further clarify the specific variables of monthly income, it is necessary to conduct a multiple comparison. The results are shown in Table 10. In summary, there are significant differences in brand awareness and brand association among consumers with monthly incomes below 1000 RMB, and those with monthly incomes of 2001-5000 RMB, 5001-8000 RMB, and above 8000 RMB. Additionally, notable differences exist in both brand awareness and brand association between those earning 1000-2000 RMB and 5001-8000 RMB per month. There is also a substantial divergence in brand association between individuals earning 1000-2000 RMB and over 8000 RMB monthly. The average score for brand awareness is highest among those earning 5001-8000 RMB, while the highest level of brand association belongs to those earning above 8000 RMB. This may suggest that when NFL formulates its brand marketing strategies, it should prioritize targeting middle-to-high income groups.

Table 10

Multiple comparison of monthly income

Variable	Monthly income (I)	Monthly income (J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Significance
Brand awareness	Below 1000RMB	1000RMB-2000RMB	-.66307	.290
		2001RMB-5000RMB	-1.08191*	.002
		5001RMB-8000RMB	-1.49873*	.000
		Above 8000RMB	1.17381*	.001
	1000RMB-2000RMB	Below 1000RMB	.66307	.290
		2001RMB-5000RMB	-.41884	.803
		5001RMB-8000RMB	-.83565*	.006
		Above 8000RMB	-.51074	.374
	2001RMB-5000RMB	Below 1000RMB	-1.08191*	.002
		1000RMB-2000RMB	.41884	.803
		5001RMB-8000RMB	-.41682	.625
		Above 8000RMB	-.09190	1.000
	5001RMB-8000RMB	Below 1000RMB	1.49873*	.000
		1000RMB-2000RMB	.83565*	.006
		2001RMB-5000RMB	.41682	.625
		Above 8000RMB	.32492	1.000
	Above 8000RMB	Below 1000RMB	1.17381*	.001
		1000RMB-2000RMB	.51074	.374
		2001RMB-5000RMB	.09190	1.000
		5001RMB-8000RMB	-.32492	1.000

		1000RMB- 2000RMB	-1.21232*	.002
		2001RMB- 5000RMB	-1.57998*	.000
	Below 1000RMB	5001RMB- 8000RMB	-2.03713*	.000
		Above 8000RMB	-2.12381*	.000
		Below 1000RMB	1.21232*	.002
		2001RMB- 5000RMB	-.36765	1.000
	1000RMB- 2000RMB	5001RMB- 8000RMB	-.82481*	.018
		Above 8000RMB	-.91148*	.006
		Below 1000RMB	1.57998*	.000
		1000RMB- 2000RMB	.36765	1.000
Brand association	2001RMB- 5000RMB	5001RMB- 8000RMB	-.45716	.585
		Above 8000RMB	-.54383	.260
		Below 1000RMB	2.03713*	.000
		1000RMB- 2000RMB	.82481*	.018
	5001RMB- 8000RMB	2001RMB- 5000RMB	.45716	.585
		Above 8000RMB	-.8668	1.000
		Below 1000RMB	2.12381*	.000
		1000RMB- 2000RMB	.91148*	.006
	Above 8000RMB	2001RMB- 5000RMB	.54383	.260
		5001RMB- 8000RMB	.8668	1.000

## Discussion

The study proposed two questions on 1) whether the SBBE model applies to Chinese market and 2) whether age, gender, monthly income and educational background influence NFL's brand equity. Regarding question1, the hypothesized dimensions are supported. The scale showed that brand association dimension (4.53) of NFL in the Chinese market is better than brand awareness dimension (3.30). Given the fact that American football is not an Olympic

sport yet, it is not surprising to observe NFL's relative weak competitiveness in the global market place, especially in China. It has been suggested that 'compared with ice hockey teams or American football teams, soccer teams have a better chance to have a stronger global appeal' (Couvelare and Richelieu, 2005). However, flag football is officially a new sport at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games, thus actively promoting flag football to Chinese market will benefit NFL's brand awareness. In Shanghai, flag football is emerging as a popular sport, mainly manifested in its rich tournament system, wide range of participants, and social significance. The Shanghai City Amateur Flag Football League, hosted by the Shanghai Rugby and Football Association, is divided into Youth Group, University Group, Mixed Open Group, Men's Open Group, and Women's Open Group. This indicates marketers should fully take advantage of flag football.

Concerning question 2, the results of ANOVA reveal a significant difference in brand equity between different age, monthly income and educational background groups. Among the surveyed population, the male high-income and upper-middle-income groups aged between 26 and 35, who hold a bachelor's degree or above, exhibit the highest levels of brand awareness and brand association, making them the most likely candidates to develop purchase intent and become potential NFL consumers. Literature has proved a positive relationship between income level and fandom towards foreign soccer clubs (Al Ganideh, S. F. and Good, L. K., 2015). Back in 2007, the NFL had planned to hold an exhibition game at the Workers' Stadium in Beijing, but it was eventually canceled. The author believes that there is now a better opportunity than in 2007. Monaghan and Read (2022) suggested that international events would be an important tool to develop new fans. If a NFL game were held in China, it will bring not only ticket revenue but also, more importantly, an increase in public attention. Because of this opportunity, Chinese audiences will intuitively experience the charm of NFL games. Furthermore, through word of mouth, the brand equity of the NFL can be disseminated to a wider range of audiences.

The surveyed population of adolescents under 18 years old with a high school diploma or less education have the lowest levels of brand awareness and brand association. This group should be vigorously targeted by NFL at present, as they represent a highly potential fan base once they turn into adults. A study has found 'a strong link between the level of brand awareness of a professional sport brand in a foreign market and the presence of foreign players from that market's country' (Chanavat and Bodet, 2009). Thus, participation in youth flag football program will help lay the foundation of next generation American football players in China. If a Chinese could play in professional American football leagues in the United States, surely it will arouse more interest from China. For example, in 2002, after Yao Ming was selected as the No.1 pick in the National Basketball Association (NBA), 30 million regular viewers in China watched Houston Rockets' games (Larmer, 2005).

### **Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

This study sought to address the gap in the research regarding sport brand equity in a foreign market. The instrument developed focused on 11 items of brand equity as identified through literature review. After a pilot study, 1 item was deleted due to inconsistency with the factor. After analyzing 464 surveys, the remaining 10 items proved to be relevant. As a consequence, the SBBE dimensions (brand awareness and brand association) were empirically supported. The results of ANOVA demonstrate that age, educational background and monthly income



have significant influence on both dimensions of brand equity. Gender only has significant influence on the brand association dimension. Hence, this study also suggests marketers should pay attention to the impact of demographic factors (e.g., age, income, education) has in Chinese market.

Brand equity has garnered great scholarly attention in sport marketing literature, however, there is a paucity of studies regarding the brand equity of sport leagues in a foreign market, NFL in particular. This research is the first addressing the topic. In addition, it extends previous research by confirming the effect of age, monthly income and educational background have on brand awareness and brand association. These findings provide insights for future research regarding the role of demographic factors play on brand equity of sport leagues in international markets.

As with any study, the limitations of the research must be addressed. Firstly, convenience sampling method can lead to biased representation of the data; alternative sampling method would be encouraged to use in future research. Secondly, quantitative study has received some criticism because the measurement developed by social scientists possesses inaccuracy (Bryman, 2012). Thus, a qualitative approach concerning the factors that influence the brand awareness and the brand association dimensions could be employed in future research. Lastly, this research does not investigate the relationship between the brand equity and purchase intent. Future research could delve into the relationship through the moderating role of demographic variables such as age, income and education.

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